



A man
puts
his whole
life
into
words,
withholding
nothing . . .
but
his name

the
**AIR
FORCE**
needs
MEN

THE
PITCHER
AND THE
WELL

There is a mystery about this book. In the furore over its publication in New Zealand last year some reviewers said it must be fiction, and others that it could only be fact. The one man who knows the truth says that he received these letters late in World War II "as the effects of a deceased P.O.W." and that they were written to him by a New Zealand flyer whom he refuses to identify.

Fiction or fact, this book must be read — it is a piece of self-revelation that tingles with life.

As far as we know, the letters were dictated from a hospital bed in a German prison camp. Day after day, night after night, unable even to turn his head to see when his friend Don was coming to write for him, the author planned out the sections of this book in his mind, and with candid brutality set down the story of his life in New Zealand and in the air war over Europe.

The defenses are down in this book. A man who knows he is dying has a chance to tell that one story that everyone has — "and isn't that story worth the telling?" The whole of life in a minute of time."

He addressed the letters to the man who knew him best, Squadron Leader J. D. McDonald. As a result, McDonald became the literary executor of this extraordinary book.

continued on back flap

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The pitcher and the well

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Foreword

NEAR the end of the last war I showed an untidy bundle of manuscript to the present publisher. It was about a third of what you read here. I know he was a bookseller, but I don't think he was a publisher at that time. Intermittently, over the past dozen years, he has pressed me to publish these letters and I have refused, perhaps because they seemed so peculiarly my personal property. I'm not at all sure that I'm right even now. I'm getting mighty close to betraying confidences.

These letters were addressed to me but I think the author was really writing to himself. They reached me as the effects of a deceased prisoner of war.

At one time, during the last war, all grounded airmen-pilots ended with me. It was my business to see if they had the capacity to become navigators, but my first job was always to rebuild the man. No one who hasn't been grounded can begin to grasp the psychological shock.

In consequence of this, quite close relations grew up. I received many confidences and, so far as I know, I betrayed none. These letters are confidences too. Next-of-kin may be assured that no one will be recognizable unless by those who actually shared in the incidents described.

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I knew the writer for a short time only, but I knew him very well. None better. He was the alertest person I've ever met and the most self-conscious one. I'm greatly surprised to discover how honest he was with himself. But what I find most disconcerting is his ability to write of his childhood and youth as though he were unaware of what was subsequently to happen to him. When he is a boy he writes as a boy.

Here, then, is a selection of letters from a German prison hospital. The writer died of burns received when his aircraft was shot down. How long he retained his grip on reality each reader will have to judge for himself. The later letters are all unintelligible and the descent to unintelligibility is very sudden. These are all rejected, along with dated stories, political speculation, obscenity and downright incoherent panic.

What you, the reader, will make of these letters I can't pretend to guess. I didn't want to write this foreword because the letters explain themselves, and I'd hate to come between you and the book. However, the publisher insists.

The selection is mainly my own and is all I want to publish. Who the writer was doesn't matter any more.

Don! If you survive, please get in touch with me through the publisher.

J. D. McDONALD

The Pitcher and the Well

I

THE Chief Flying Instructor was very decent about it all. He pointed out that I could certainly make the grade in time, but we didn't have the time. "In 180 hours," he said, "you have to complete the whole syllabus and you're so far behind now that it isn't possible. You are to report at base right away. Get your clearance under way at once. And the best of luck to you."

The best of luck to you. So that was that!

I don't quite know how I got the signatures to my clearance and my course wisely left me alone. Within a day I was gone and a chapter was closed. The feverish swot, the anxious dual, and the still more anxious solo, the sycophantic cultivation of authority, the whole senseless, brainless discipline, the heartwarming friendships and the deadening routine — all ended.

Suddenly I felt very tired of it all. The nervous energy I had lived on for so long was exhausted at last. Quite frankly, I didn't care what was waiting for me at base, even though the latrine rumor went that we were to do kitchen fatigues for the duration. I just didn't care.

I reported at base, drew my blankets, reported to the Station Warrant Officer, found my dormitory and was told to in-

terview you at once. Why all the hurry? I had the duration ahead of me. Rather dully, and quite unaware of the crisis of my life, I knocked on your office door. Do you want to know, very candidly, how it all seemed? I don't see why you should but, at least, it's a new look.

A thin, and probably tall, officer was sitting at a desk across the light, another of the apple-polishing desk warriors. This one was long faced and balding just over the temples.

"Good morning. Sit down," you said.

Now, "Good morning. Sit down," was definitely something new, so I looked you over with a faint interest. You wouldn't care to know how faint. A long nose, sheep's face, blue eyes, mustache . . . They all wear a mustache. A general appearance of restlessness. Thus, me on you.

"How did it happen?" you asked. "Irregular circuits, faulty approaches, poor judgment of the ground, heavy landings or temperamental instability?"

I grinned faintly, which admitted most of it. At least you knew what you were talking about. You grinned in reply.

"Had your tail knocked right in? Are you right on the ground?"

I nodded. You watched me. I think I know now that you were making up your mind what line to try on me. It didn't occur to me at the time that you had probably had my file for a day or so before I saw you. I suppose you had one or two ideas about what you wanted to do with me and how to go about it. You loved to play God, didn't you? With me, sitting there, you just had to decide what to try.

Oh, I'd had my arse knocked in all right. What of it? So I just nodded.

"Game to get up and fight? Any guts left? There's the toughest job of the lot going begging. Have a go?"

"What, sir?"

"Navigator."

My faintly stirring interest died. Navigator! You watched it die.

"Think carefully. Whoever sets the course of the objective, bombs it when he gets there, and then brings the crate safely home he's the captain of the aircraft, no matter what they call him. The others are there to do as they are told. But it calls for qualities we just can't get. And it's the loneliest job in the world. The pilots and the gunners have each other's company. They share their responsibilities and they're less than yours. They check each other's judgments. But you — you're like God! You're on your own. You can consult no one. You're alone with your knowledge and your faith in yourself and whatever guts you have. Christ, man, don't you want to take on omnipotence?"

I just nodded. I couldn't do anything else. It was a dedication. From that moment I was a navigator. That line would have succeeded with no one except me. And it was a long shot, even with me.

How long did you have my file?

2

THE Selection Committee had been an odd pair. The Squadron Leader who was chairman was quite obviously a dug-out. It must have been trying to have to interview thousands of young men all over the country, to ask the same inane questions and receive the same equally uninformative replies. With him was a teacher who assessed educational qualifica-

tions. He was transparently overawed by his bemedaled and uniformed colleague. So was I.

I told them my name, age, suitably adjusted, education and threw in height, weight and sex as make-weights. The jaded eyes of the S/L flickered a little, but the schoolmaster was shocked. It would be easy to say that, anyway, the tribe is gutless and very easily shocked, but it just isn't true. Many of the top dogs on our side are schoolmasters.

However, my bearing, etc., must have been satisfactory, because the committee decided that I was pilot material. At least, the S/L wrote "pilot" and then grunted at his colleague who nodded. I wonder how often this "consultation" went just this way? In due course I should hear when and where to report and such other conditions as would be required of me. I was decanted out into the street thinking of the inauspicious beginnings of similar grand adventures. I even permitted myself to dream a little. Permitted? Encouraged is a better word. After all, I did somewhat resemble the chap in the poster — you know the one —

THE AIR FORCE NEEDS *MEN*. ARE YOU THAT MAN?

I must grow a mustache. The fellow on the poster wears one.

Still a little under the influence of my own future glamour, I went around to impress a lady. And why not?

In due course I reported at a ground training station somewhere in the North Island. The course was the greatest collection of grand chaps in the world. The food was excellent, the beer in the canteen, nectar. Even the weather was remarkable. The world was rosy.

We learned to march in threes, whom to salute, and a little Air Force law, sufficient to get us into trouble but not enough to get us out of it. We did P.T., had periodical, perfunctory medical tests, and did a little elementary arithmetic. From time to time we were examined by a psychologist who inquired into our motivation; that is, why the hell we left our little farm to join the Air Force. We told him what he expected, varied with what was good for him to know of the Freudian recesses of our depraved minds. It became quite a line to try to set him a real puzzler to interpret.

We paraded for the stationmaster who complimented us on our marching. We paraded for various visiting big shots who also complimented us on our marching. We paraded for the Air Officer Commanding (N.Z.) who failed to compliment us on our marching. No one complimented us on our arithmetic, or on our motivations. Do you gather we were bored? Only partly, towards the end.

Then two officers came to select some of us to train in Canada under the Empire Air Training scheme. One of them was you, I believe, but it could easily not have been. I was retained and didn't meet them anyway. I'm glad you took Simmy though. His motivation test reminds me of McGonigle. You won't remember but the psychologist asked him why he joined the Air Force and he replied that it was to impress a girl back home. This was deemed insufficient, so, hopefully, Simmy raised his bid by venturing that he aimed to impress several. After this things grew a little involved until one of the blokes asked, "Suppose this," indicating the already sufficiently confused psychologist, "were an enemy on your sights. Would you do him in?" "What, now?" said Simmy with alacrity and a gleam in his eye. He was accepted.

As the time drew near to be posted from General Training School I could march in threes with everything from two blondes to half a horse. I knew when I was entitled to a court-martial and what my chances were. My long multiplication was good. Thus superlatively equipped for a flying career I repaired to Elementary Flying Training School after a suitable spot of leave.

Elementary Flying Training School. We tumbled out of the truck and looked across the airdrome, the first one most of us had ever seen. Little yellow Tiger Moths were fluttering in and out, two little knobs on the top of the fuselage were the heads of the instructor and pupil. Already we could feel the helmets and earphones on our heads. Helmets and earphones. Helmets *with* earphones. This was real. This was life.

Strange that I should remember so clearly that feeling of being alive. Sometimes now, I hope I die in my sleep, and then I'm afraid to go to sleep for fear I die. Only God knows how afraid I am. Life's so good. Why do I have to die? Why me? I suppose I must be rather horrible to look at. I suppose parts of me are dead already. They've cut off the feeling in places. Or do I still have those places?

We paraded for our kit and drew flying clothes, flying boots and helmets with earphones. Then we were assigned to instructors. Mine was a tall thin youth of under twenty, very precious in manner and obviously someone's darling. Probably his mother's. He called my name. "Yes . . . er . . . sir," said I. That "er" was an insult. It was also a serious mistake.

We waddled awkwardly to a Tiger. Now I know how a sheep feels with all that hamper between its legs. I felt like

a baby with two diapers. I had been shown all the drill of vital actions, been given instruction in parachutes and theory of flight. I was pater-perfect. And this was the day. I wasn't the least scared. After all I was to be merely a passenger as yet. So, now to enjoy the show.

In actual fact I was given the most brutal thrashing of my life, as the instructor threw the aircraft all over the sky; so much so that when we landed I was completely disorganized.

"How d'ye feel?"

"I feel that an error of judgment in the Air Force is apt to be serious."

His childishly stern face broke into a delighted grin. "I say, that's rather clever of you," then, abruptly remembering his two months' seniority as a popeye, "that's all for today."

I lurched off. That attempt at a joke had taken all I had. I saluted and tried to meet the eye of the mechanics round the hangar. Curiously enough, I even grew to like him later.

As I was nearing the end of my E.F.T.S. course I began to have doubts. My cross country was really good (cross country in a Tiger Moth!), my ground subjects excellent. I was never airsick, not even when the wind was lifting the dust in spirals all around the boundary fence. But I was troubled by night flying, even with the instructor along. Oh, yes I know the E.F.T.S. is no place for night flying but I'm talking about the early, early days when each station did what seemed right in its eyes — meaning in the eyes of the C.O. Then there was aerobatics. Or rather, there wasn't. I froze to the controls. And that was bad. Very bad. And dangerous too.

Yet, on occasion I'd positively bubble with confidence. On cross-country flights especially. I was alone with a world of

my own, and as I worked out my positions and entered up my log my mind played with the checkerboard of countryside below me, the carelessly tumbled cloud heaps and the great blue air between them. I loved to look at cumulus clouds — of course, they're to be avoided — turbulence, electrical disturbances, poor visibility . . . But how lovely they are!

Then there's the slow march of the landscape. At height everything below moves so slowly as to make progress imperceptible. Especially when one flies a Tiger Moth.

All the same there's a deep content in being like Mohammed's coffin. Perhaps that's why it is between heaven and earth. Then the mood of placid happiness would pass and be replaced by exultation. "The top of the world to ye!" really took on meaning. In such a mood I'd throw the aircraft all around the sky and sometimes feel myself a part of the aircraft and other times a part of the sky. Sometimes, again, I'd feel myself completely detached. It's a wonder that didn't become a literal fact sometimes. Then I'd fake my log to account for the lost minutes, but the Nav wallah had faith in me, so all was well.

First solo! Big day! Most of the course have already soloed. What's wrong with me? I know the patter better than anyone. I make good approaches, hold off nicely; but I always seem to make perfect landings thirty feet up. Anyway, today's the day. For Christ's sake listen to the instructor's parting instructions. For Christ's sake remember everything.

Rev up, check up, chocks away, taxi out; must remember to zigzag at a walking pace. Vital actions. Turn, watch for the green, open her up steadily, keep her straight by coarse use of the rudder. Stick forward, tail lifts, center stick. And, somehow, miraculously, here we are, airborne. Climb to a

thousand feet. Level off. Turn on circuit. This game is easy. Complete circuit. Prepare to land. Oh Christ, let me make a good approach. Little bit of motor to flatten out. Stall her onto the ground. Come on, stall, you bitch, stall. Please don't balloon on me. Please. And please don't drop out of my hand on to the deck either. Just a perfect three-pointer. Please. Stall, damn you, stall. A bit of a bump, but not much. No one could call that a really heavy landing, a bit heavy perhaps . . . well, rather heavy, say. Taxi in. Look out for the other blokes. Hell's delight! I've gone solo. Not the least scared either, too damned busy. Now for the blasé air. Better find out how heavy the landing was first, though. "Not so bad," says the instructor. Next stop, Berlin.

3

THE siren began. You know how it goes . . . an undecided deep roar rising to a wail, and as it grew shriller my stomach tightened with it. Which one of us? The crash wagon had already gone, its bellow died in the distance. Sedately behind it trundled the blood cart.

I began to run after them although I couldn't see any flames. It was that or stay in the duty pilot's hut, and wait. I fell down on the stopbank on the edge of the airfield and right in front of me the lights were shining on a tangled mass of wreckage and I heard my own breath whistling. Of course, I'd been running, that was it. Then someone laughed, so I knew he was all right and I discovered what was wrong with

me, what would always be wrong with me: too much imagination.

He'd hit the top of the stopbank, turned over, and hurled an engine a furlong from the wreckage, a station record. There was red-hot metal, petrol, twisted aluminum and erks all over the place. Nev's sole injury was a broken nose acquired when someone trod on his face when they cut him out of the airframe. He was a course senior to me and so he would have the immense advantage of getting his wings while his nose was still damaged; a neat combination of circumstances which would be a great help to him at the Wing Dance. Practically make the cow irresistible.

As soon as we got back they paraded all the airmen pilots. We wondered what the hell for. We fell in, were marched to the hangars, the roll was called and then our instructors took us up and beat up the station. It was supposed to harden us. I was so relieved on two counts that nothing an instructor could do would frighten me in the least. The two counts? One, that Nev wasn't killed; two, that it wasn't me.

As we were tackling the bacon and eggs afterwards someone brought up that stupid superstition about accidents going in threes. I chipped in sharply, someone made a joke about triplets, the remark was forgotten and we all went off to bed.

To celebrate his let-off by the Court of Inquiry, Nev went along to the low-flying ground and beat up a certain sheep station a couple of miles away. Now that station housed thousands of sheep, hundreds of horses, dozens of shepherds, and a girl. It happened that an instructor who had had no luck in that quarter was passing at a prim 4000 feet. So Nev was court-martialed.

It was the first court-martial ever held on the station so

we were all of a not unpleasant twitter. We airmen pilots were to be permitted to attend as a special favor of the C.O. Possibly as a deterrent, do you think? For days we debated Nev's chances and reluctantly came to the conclusion that whatever he pleaded, they had him. Cold. And, that being so, he'd had it too.

The ceremonial wasn't very impressive. We found out later that no one really knew how to conduct the show and everyone was working from the Good Book. We had just finished collecting for the sweep when the accused pleaded guilty. That shook the court visibly. They hadn't thought of that one. Neither had we. And it left all the bets in the air . . . and subject to all the nice points of law and logic that a chap with a day's pay at stake can dig up.

In the end, Nev served a short term in the Budgie House. On his release he became the founder and sole member of the Crooks' Club. There were many more later.

Then Ginger got off the panel coming into the flare path. I noted, next day, that there was a quarter of a mile between the first graze and the wreckage. At the time, at the first rumble of the siren, something inside me said "two" and I quickly looked around to see the word forming on the other lips.

Over at the wreckage, someone called out, "Here he is." I nearly fell over him. He had a deep cut over one eye but no other visible injury; but he was dead all right. Very dead. He had been thrown out of the horribly telescoped airframe. It was the first dead body I had ever seen; it numbed me. The wild dash around the sky afterwards didn't make me snap out of it. I was scared, badly scared. Ginger had been such a good pilot, such a very good pilot.

I sat on my bed and stared at the mirror until my roommate asked what the devil I thought I was looking at. How could I tell him I thought I was looking at number three. We all felt the same. One day someone said what we were all thinking. "It'll be good when the third is over." Nobody laughed. Nobody nodded either.

In our course, easily the best pupil was Jim. Older than the rest of us, but we all liked him because he was such a good guy and so damned well balanced. Of course I was regarded by the younger pups as coeval with Methuselah and Jim was looked upon as Father Time himself. Perhaps that's why we became, if not friends, at least something more than acquaintances. Apart from our extreme longevity we had nothing in common except our length. Oh yes, Jim was long and thin too. He was as steady as I was mercurial; as unimaginative and painstaking as I was the reverse. Just plain solid virtue.

At the Wing Dance he met a girl. At the beginning of the last dance they announced their engagement. My heart warmed to Jim. How unlike him! And yet, when I think back on it, how like him!

Jim-like, he weighed things up, considered all the factors and came to a firm decision. Jim's decisions were always firm ones. Then he carried it through. Perhaps he'd hurried a little this time, but then life was hurrying us all at the time.

It was the real thing, too. I watched them. She came nearly to his shoulder and when she got a crick in her neck from looking up at him, she put her palm behind her neck for a little support. The rest of us had somehow merged into the decorations. Who'd have thought that Jim's aged hormones — he was all of thirty — would have acted in such a skittish manner?

The way she looked at him comes back to me with singular vividness as I lie here. I can't see anything to either side except when they move me to work on me but I insist that my position will enable me to see anyone approaching my bed. Nobody does. Nobody except Don.

Naturally, next day Jim went along to beat up her home a little. Now, an aged Vincent, such as he was flying, is the most reliable aircraft in the sky. The Peggy engine which powers it is the most reliable piece of ironmongery in the Air Force, and Jim was reliability personified. Nevertheless he was number three.

We saw the smoke almost as soon as we heard the siren. I heard that Jim had been hanging the old Vincent by her fan in the sky and she'd just slid in. Quite gently. But she burned like all hell nevertheless.

The crash tender was there when we arrived. The N.C.O. in charge in his asbestos suit just walks through the flames and brings the pilot out. Which accounts for the care with which that N.C.O. inspects his suit for defects.

This time he came through empty-handed and when they took his helmet off he just looked around him. You see, there was a girl running in aimless circles round the fire. Did I tell you he finished in her father's hay shed? She was making incoherent noises and that, coupled with the horrible smell of burning meat, made me want to retch.

Her home was about twenty yards away. We tried to take her there but she just stared at us and said very distinctly, "He called out to me. Honest he did. Do you think it lasted long?" Her rather childlike voice had the horribly serious note of one who is genuinely seeking information.

Then she remembered and began that damned mouthing

again. Nothing human, just an un-understanding animal noise like a bereaved beast. She'd stop . . . then repeat herself; and so the ghastly cycle went on. Is memory a cyclic or rhythmical thing and not at all continuous as we think? And can shock be discontinuous too?

We were all very cut up about Jim, yet we got over him more easily than we did Ginger. You see, he was number three. That made all the difference.

Later, in England, when accidents were everyday things, we came to regard them as just that, but my earliest memories of them still stick. We grew up tremendously in a very short time. I knew nineteen-year-olds who were almost senile.

But, as you knew, I was removed from the pilot business. I was wedded to navigation now.

4

THERE was one thing which none of us quite understood. It was widely believed to be coincidence or luck but Andy and I thought you managed it too well for it to be merely luck.

Did you ever notice us on bar duty in the Officers' Mess? I thought a puzzled look fell on us now and then. After all, air-crew as waiters are unusual. You're bound to have wondered.

We were weighing you up. Probing the secret of "how it's done." We answered the phone with indefatigable zeal, watched others jockeying for invitations to your parties, listened to the gossip of the Waafs, and the malice of the social-

climbing set. And we found nothing. We studied you with anxious care and were no wiser than before. No one could claim you to be charming, handsome, wealthy or even devoted.

Then the Officers' Mess dance provided the solution. Perhaps, as Andy pointed out, it had been lying around too close under our noses. Anyway, there it was.

When everyone was sitting out in an interval between dances, late as usual, you opened the door for a tall blonde in a black velvet frock. You stood beside her, looking around so she was forced to wait a moment too. Of course you knew how effective it was, but did she? Andy whistled softly without knowing he was whistling. All the officers present with wives suddenly realized what a bastard you were.

You danced. You moderately, she wonderfully well. People watched. Why? You leaned on the bar. Andy and I elbowed the other barmen away. You talked. She listened. We listened.

And we knew at once what it was. It was as though the others weren't there. The blonde felt it too. Unwittingly, we also were within the charmed circle. And it was all that. So beautifully done. Herrick couldn't have done it better.

I don't believe any girl is impervious to the heady feeling that you are vividly aware of her and that all the rest are rather like decoration on the wall. Not very good decoration either. And with what a light, sure touch it was managed!

Naturally, the drink helped. But Andy and I both knew you wouldn't be in the mess for breakfast, that no word would be spoken, no overt proposal made, but that she just couldn't bear to edge away from so bubblelike a dream. You cupped your hand so that the dancers couldn't see you beckon

to her with the other. She was about eighteen inches away. Her face lit up in a puckish way and, with her hand cupped for secrecy, she beckoned you to come her way. You drew a line on the floor with your toe and advanced to it. She put her shoe alongside yours. Andy and I had to climb half over the bar to see. Thus satisfactorily within millimeters of each other, you looked down on her. She was tall and a tall girl likes her men to look down on her. You said "Hullo, down there!" just as I would have done but with infinitely more grace. She looked up at you and the look was a legacy from the kind of kid she was before the grog got her.

Six women you brought to a party in the mess, distributed them among your friends and then went to bed. Were you so sure of them? Or didn't you care? The types who came to Ladies' Nights at the Cads' Club thought you were marvelous. But that vivid little thing from the south, consoling herself with too much grog, said to no one in particular "That's the man I'm going to marry if it kills us both." And your redhead's reply? "That makes two of us and that'll be hell in bed." We knew you'd marry neither. Andy and I both think you'll marry for money — something tangible anyway.

5

You probably had a bad liver. No matter for what reason you took your ill humor out on me. The flight sergeant was very pleased about it. The gray wolves scared his little soul so much his stripes got wriggles in them.

I stared at my feet, at your desk, into the corners. Anywhere except at you. Why did you dress me down so? How does one behave on these occasions, anyway? The discipline of the Air Force is senseless. Worse, pointless. No man should be compelled to be silent when the castigator is, after all, merely another man. Your ring of braid doesn't make you a god, you know. I don't suppose you do ever think of yourself that way except on days like this.

Why do you want to humiliate me? Do peccadilloes call for this sort of thing . . . all this elaborate paraphernalia of humbug? There should be some device so that an offense can be meted out its due punishment but no one should be able to vent his spleen just because one of the parties is an officer and the other is not.

So I looked at my feet. I bet I looked sullen. I felt it too. That comic opera business of marching me in and making me mark time like an American drum majorette: what end do you think it serves?

I think the whole business of rank needs looking into with a coldly inquiring eye. Even when I was myself commissioned, I felt the same way. Still do. No man should be compelled to call another "sir." It's an affront to human dignity. And all the saluting eyewash is another.

While you're at it, add this: no man in the services should be another man's servant. I feel very strongly on the batman racket. On my first station in Britain, an old established one, we had all the trimmings. I wonder how many men who should be fighting are employed in all that nonsense? What's wrong with a cafeteria service for officers? Why shouldn't I make my own bed? Oh yes, I'll lie on it all right.

When you tore those strips off me I hadn't had the chance

to see things from the officer side. I have now. And it looks no different.

When this war is over there'll have to be some furious thought given to the situations of all those retired officers so firmly planted on the backs of the lesser breeds. You and your kind will have to do the thinking because the retired officers can't. Cerebration is a bar to promotion. Better watch out, my fine feathered friend.

6

OF course you knew how the C.O. hated you. It's remarkable how all those ex-Aero Club instructors made such soft jobs for themselves. If I must be fair I'll admit he was in the First War; but why should one be fair?

Apart from his tour of duty at the bar I can't see how he filled in his time on the station. He hated us too. Your frantic work on us must have made him mad. And so he hated us because of you. Besides, hadn't we failed to learn to fly? So weren't we clearly washouts? All of this came a little oddly from someone who had probably not flown anything save Tiger Moths for many a moon. Well, I've flown Tiger Moths too . . . Sir! The fact that we were to be given another chance, and as navigators in aircrew, galled him; perhaps navigator ju-ju was as far beyond him as it was for all the other dugouts. Had I lived I'd have loved to flaunt my flying arsehole in his face.

This second chance was only possible because of you, so he

transferred all his resentment to you. Tell me why. Was it because we were the youth that never returns? Were we the youngster he was when Spads and Camels were names to conjure with?

Your gay friends were another insult to him. And weren't they gay! The dope I have on you. His batman said he used to practice the neat little speeches he made when visiting dignitaries were around. Of course, there's a very, very distinguished precedent for that, but all the same, your natural flair for that sort of thing hurt like hell. Did you parade it a bit? We all hoped you did. He couldn't help thinking, too, that the studied deference you showed to his rank was somehow a mocking of him personally. It was, wasn't it? You *must* have seen through him as easily as we did and you must have despised what you saw. You couldn't help it. Not you.

I wonder if the dimwit ever wondered why he had no trouble with the gray wolves? We could have told him. A long-nosed, sheep-faced, balding bloke represented to us what every man desires. Do you know your Barrie? All we wanted was a second chance . . . probably to make all the same mistakes again, — but a second chance, nevertheless. So the gray wolves were lambs for the nonce. Did the old goat ever think of the mess — the father and mother of a mess — we could have made of his station full of apple polishers? There never was a station so full of erks working desperately to hold their ground jobs and thus keep themselves out of the army. Their hides were so thick that their efforts to save them savored of redundancy. Of course they were all frantically keen on being remustered to aircrew but felt that, with their technical skills, they could best serve etc., and etc. I can't for the life of me see why a man fit for the army should be in ground crew

at all. His technical skills would be very welcome among the brown jobs. And why, in New Zealand, should ground crew be in uniform at all? It's the same with the women in uniform. Any soldier will tell you of his conception of the functions of women in wartime.

Back to the C.O. How it annoyed him when we barracked like all hell for you in the final of the station table tennis. Not that it helped much. You know, when you were driving Harry farther and farther back until he was right against the wall and defending like mad, we all knew you couldn't keep it up. We knew you'd drive out. And when you did and looked for the hole in your bat and laughed, we all laughed with you. All except the C.O. He was laughing at you. And when you were licked we all felt we had seen the other side of you. The bloodless calculator, the cautious estimator was gone, and we saw a guy going in to bash superior skill right off the table — if he could. And when he couldn't he just went right on bashing pigheadedly to the bitter end. Clearly a man and a brother.⁴

Say, how old are you, you hairless hound?

7

I WONDER how Andy came to be grounded. We all used to talk about how it happened to us. Many of us felt ill used. We were all sure we could have made it in time. All except Andy. He told us nothing until we pressed him and then he offered a string of mutually exclusive alternative reasons. Some of them were very funny. We gave up.

Yet something must have happened. They didn't ground him for any lack of capacity. He didn't have any of the temperamental troubles that beset me. Nor did he have any doubts about where his duty lay. You knew, none better, because you couldn't help knowing that the gray wolves were as uneasy as rabbits suspecting a weasel. None of us knew what navigation was really like or whether we'd make it as navigators. We were all prone to the most childish upsets when our troubles got us down. All except Andy. He was so serene. He had deeper roots.

You're bound to have noticed it in the three-cornered discussions we had. Andy and I always felt a little timorous in taking you on but it was a hell of a fine exercise . . . I remember once, when we were licking our wounds afterwards, I asked Andy how it was we always ran into the unexpected with you. "He sees all round it," said Andy briefly. Do remember that. Andy's good opinion is worth having.

I thought over what he'd said. "How?" I asked. Andy looked at me as if I were a slow child. Then he absent-mindedly slapped the arse in front of him with his parallel ruler. The fellow who belonged to the arse turned round to look into the matter. Before he could even get going, Andy asked, "D'ye think they'll kick him out of the show?" meaning you. "Sure to," said the bloke, "when they find out about him." He went on with his plotting after first tenderly feeling his arse to make sure Andy hadn't ignited his matches.

Andy wouldn't write to you. Not Andy. No need.

When we used to go womaning, we'd split the pair up as quickly as possible. It's the only way. Usually we'd not meet again but, very occasionally we did, and took in a dance somewhere. My girl was always sleepy. Very pleased with

herself, if I may say so, and rather bewildered by the lights. Apprehension could wait until tomorrow. I can quite understand her being sleepy. I was that way too.

Andy and his girl would be as lively as kittens. She must have had at least as strenuous an evening as my girl. And I'll bet she didn't get away with a thing. I'm sure it was Andy. There was something about him which was simply fun. I'm quite sure of that because it was fun to watch them. My girl and I, quite without envy, used to enjoy it. So did a lot of others. It wasn't an act either. Just one side of the immense variety of Andy.

So here I lie. Wondering about him.

I wonder what he did in private life. I've thought over dozens of jobs he might have had but none of them fitted. Once I wondered if he were a parson. He'd have gone high in the church. Probably ended up as Pope. If he could have concealed the way he had with women.

And what a way it was. They looked up at him and their eyes danced. I've seen one he'd met only a few moments earlier run his hand against her cheek. She was sober too. They were always wanting to get him alone. He didn't have half the spadework I did. I wonder if it was because, in some absurd way or other, they trusted him.

I've seen him being pulled out of a dance into a garden. The girl held his hand and pulled. Pulled hard. She looked at him with the merriest smile. And much more than that too. Andy went. Why not? It was his own line coming back to him.

I don't think much harm followed in his wake. He was fundamentally different from twerps like me. But I don't think he had any better mental equipment. Nor did he organize his ability any better — if as well. I liked and admired

him but I never felt he was quite my equal when the chips were down. I don't think he was as ruthless as I was. Of course he had other advantages. He could be trusted. I think that even went for his women. I have an idea that he never held out anything to them other than the moment. It was they who wrote more into it. All the same, Andy would have known that. He was too sensitive not to. I wonder how he did manage it.

I wonder why Andy joined the Air Force. No, that's silly. I know. He was a man with a mission. At the bottom he believed in righteousness. He didn't believe that war was ever justified, but once in it, as always, he did his best.

No. I can't see, at any point, how Andy came to be grounded. D'ye think he knew that nav. is made for men with a mission? I wonder if he grounded himself.

8

So I stood in front of you and saluted you for the last time. You can regard these letters in that light if you like. You grinned at me. Were you really as interested in us as we all imagined or were we just interesting guinea pigs for your ideas on navigation and how to teach it?

You said, "When you come back I hope I have to salute *you*. Braid to the elbows."

"And both arms to wear it on," said I.

You nodded. "Please God."

Well, it didn't please Him.

We sailed from Auckland. I'd never been outside New Zealand before and as we passed the islands in the Gulf we all felt mighty solemn. It wasn't just the raiders to the north either, or the lovely winter's afternoon of our departure. It was that "look thy last on all things lovely" theme and it wouldn't let us be. Hardly any of the crowd didn't wonder if he'd ever see all that again. Oh, I'll admit Aucklanders overdo their admiration of the water in their own backyard but after all, it is part of New Zealand.

The ship was a luxury liner commandeered for us. De luxe is the only way to travel at the public expense, as any politician will tell you. Ever since my famished boyhood I've loved food and I consumed vast quantities of it. Strange it doesn't make me fat. On the ship, in times of peace we were told, the principal interest of the tourists was in food so, naturally, the catering was superb. Eating was really exciting.

The voyage was rather marvelous. No storms. Just the heavy Pacific swell that plays the devil with the development of sea legs. Gradually we became used to the odd feeling of insecurity.

At Suva we had a few hours' leave and the sellers of curios a few hours' harvest. It was at the beginning of the war; comparatively speaking, all passenger traffic had stopped and had not, at this time, been replaced by troop movements. One crowd came back with masses of native spears and a gory North Island versus South Island battle was fought around the decks. Rather childish? Of course.

We duly arrived in Vancouver. The C.O. marched us from the pier to the depot (Canadian for station). They were opposite each other, so the good old bloke marched us round Vancouver for an hour while he worked out the orientation.

We were one of the first parties from down under in the new training scheme. The town loved us and we loved them for that. The whole show as ours if only we could have got at it. Then we entrained on the C.P.R.

9

THE civvy pilots were a great crowd. They stooge around all day and half the night taking would-be navigators over courses they know by heart. When we get ourselves lost they bring us home, without too much publicity.

It was a wizard morning, clear, crisp and cold. The atmosphere was so clear I thought I could see the North Pole. At least, I could see on the horizon something upright and far away. I asked the pilot what it was. "Upright and far away, did you say?" he asked. "Perhaps it's the Padre."

"Hell," said I. "It's a tree."

"I know every goddam tree on this prairie," said he, "and . . . oh sure, that's it." It was too. Every tree on the goddam prairie.

The nav. was a piece of cake. The instructors had just passed through the course themselves and were a bit diffident, especially as they couldn't help wondering if we were wondering why they had been kept as instructors rather than sent overseas. Besides, they'd not had half the grueling you'd given us. That kept their hair short at the back all right. Of course we were very decent to them, in a somewhat patroniz-

ing manner I'm afraid. If they didn't get what we were trying to teach them, we'd try your line and say now-let's-get-back-to-first-principles. Suitably goaded, one of them once asked a little acidly what first principles were, and walked into this one. "Didn't your mother ever tell you anything? Principles are what keep you straight, and make you narrow."

Nav. is all you said. How could I ever have thought of anything else? How could anyone with any brains at all?

The food in Canada was a bit of a trial. Beef it was, beef it is and beef it will be. Did I tell you of the two gunners at their school in the north. It seems they were doing their usual stuff in the old Annie. You know, two gunners go up with the civvy pilot and take turns in the turret, though how they swap over beats me. Anyway, full of beef and probably belching gently, they saw just at the changeover about a thousand steers below them. (Their estimate.)

"Quick," said one, "do them in and save the Mess from any more bloody beef!"

"Oh, yeah," said the other. "What you kill in this man's country, you eat!"

I meant to tell you earlier how we used to dream about lamb. Lamb with green peas, mint sauce and new potatoes. Lamb at Christmas time. Served piping hot if you like it that way, but I'll remember long hot Christmas Days with cold lamb and mint sauce eaten under a pohutukawa at Kawhia or on the beach at Takapuna. All right, all right, I'll admit it's not much of a beach. It's just a stretch of sand barely visible under people's backsides. What of it? Will you join me in my lamb and peas?

The seasons in Canada are out of joint. They can have their snowy Christmases together with the roast beef of old

Canada. I was born under different stars. In imagination I can see the lovely rolling downs of North Canterbury and Hawkes Bay, their green swards alive with ewes and lambs. Lambs are the most appealing little things, especially before they're docked. Few people can resist the careless abandon of a young lamb's tail. Then, when Christmas is just around the corner, and one sees a well-grown lamb, one permits an appreciative eye to cruise over his handsomely upholstered little bum; one muses on the crunch of a roast leg of lamb done to a turn, one regrets the improvidence of nature in providing the dear little fellow with two hind legs only.

I could write a lyric about lamb!

IO

THEY say that Celts always bully their inferiors and fawn on their superiors. Perhaps that's what's wrong with me. I lard too many "sirs" into my conversation with the large fry and I'm a little too prone to theatricality with them too. Which is odd because, in my heart, I despise them so. I think that all I've ever admired sincerely is magnificent competence, no matter what the field.

The other half of the proverb is true too. I wish it weren't. I just can't help adopting a hectoring air with all sorts of folk whom I consider inferior in the point at issue. I'm a miserable bully in argument. I don't think it possible to doubt that I have the best mind here. But, dear Lord, how I wish I weren't such a beggar on horseback. Why the hell do I have

to make a mess of all my personal contacts? Why must I be such a liar and such a mean-spirited twerp? I'd alter myself if I could.

Looking backwards on it all now, I wish I hadn't lied quite so much. I wonder if there is a Book of Judgment? Anyway, whoever keeps it is bound to know the reasons too, so perhaps I shan't fare so badly.

All the same, in Canada, as a matter of course I began to fake my log. Want to hear about it?

Yes, as a matter of course I began to fake my log. What's so sacrosanct about a log anyway? Oh, I know, I know. I shouldn't have said that. I can see you jump as you read this.

True. Your white-haired boy got lost and took the easy way out. He asked the pilot to take him home and then carefully worked backwards from the return leg, filled in the blanks and then at T.T.T. he entered in the log, "Uncertain of position. Circle of uncertainty based on . . ." and I filled that in later.

The navigator wallah was pleased with my handling of the situation and complimented me on my honesty. I didn't bat an eyelash, nor feel the least ashamed. I just despised him for not spotting it. I tried the same line once or twice again but not too often. Anyway, the navigation was absurdly easy after the grilling you had given us, so I didn't even have to contemplate faking except in bad weather. That was mighty seldom. We don't fly in bad weather and the Canadian weather forecasting is very good in the interior. So it should be with the ring of reporting stations all around. Only quite unexpected bad luck can catch us out in bad weather.

Such as that time when an aircraft made a forced landing on a frozen lake to the north. I don't like thinking about it,

even now. And the Lord knows I've had my fill of horror since.

I had been watching the weather and listening to the station to find out if they were going to recall us. Cautious guy, me! I heard the poor sods call just before they went in. Automatically, I swung a loop on them. Of course that only gave me one position line, but you know what I can do with one position line. You ought to know. You taught me. Still, automatically, I ran up the position line as I had been taught and then began to call up the station to report that we were turning off track to search; but the station got in first with the general recall owing to the rapid and very grave deterioration in the weather. I passed that on to Hairy-Faced Dick, the pilot, and then called up the station to report our return and to pass on to them what I had picked up. They had it already, so I went back to my navigation before they could tell us to square search.

When we got back the bush pilots had already left but conditions were blowing up for a handsome blizzard. Of course they didn't get them out and a couple of pilots went in too. We were so close to them when I picked up the call; yet what could we do? Fix their position very accurately? The station and I both had bearings and that is fair enough. We could have circled above them until the others showed up with the parachute supplies? But what of the weather? They mightn't pick us up at all and training aircraft are not fueled for long searches. We might have gone in too. Besides the edge of the blizzard would be between us and the station, and visibility in a real blizzard is to be measured in inches. This was a real blizzard all right. We were neither equipped nor trained for rescue work so anything we attempted would

probably only have hampered those who knew what they were doing. That's the way I'd have liked everyone to have looked at it.

The pity was that when the sledge party found them it proved that they had been uninjured. Made a sweet job of setting her down. On the frozen, crumpled surface too. Their efforts to keep warm were pathetic, I heard. They had entered in the log a plan for a march out to the nearest telegraph line which they planned to cut, and then wait. It was feasible too and they knew where they were and that they had been heard. So they planned to wait.

Low down on the lake they wouldn't see the blizzard until shortly before it swept over the ridge and hit them. It may have been as well. They were all huddled together when found.

The passing-out examinations were due shortly after this. At this time the big training scheme was mighty nebulous, hardly organized at all. All the same these examinations were important to me. I worked like hell. I was a wizard on the theory of navigation and my cross-country's were very well above the average, especially when the weather was good. When it wasn't, I worried about it. Also I worried about what the Air Force would do with me because I knew I was a poor type. Whatever else I may lie about I never lied about me; not to me.

Passing out! There I stand. I'm what I believe the Yanks call the "honor graduate" of my class; in other words I have passed with special distinction. I'd known it all along. So had the course. But it wasn't a popular result. Merely an inevitable one. Perhaps they know me too well. Yet I'd like

to be popular with the chaps but I just don't click. It may be that I'm too keen to make a good impression. I wish I could play a musical instrument. That helps.

Anyway, here I stand, looking the visiting-very-big-shot firmly in the eye, head up, chin drawn in, looking one's own height, thumbs on the line of the seam of the trousers.

I'm tall and thin and I've had my issue uniform altered so that it fits without a wrinkle. I just stand and don't bat an eyelash. The V-V-B-S approves. I look like what he fancies he looked like when he was my age. My blushing honors are thick upon me. But I'm thinking of that forced landing on the ice and of those who didn't come back from the search and I know the course is thinking of it too. But that's our secret. And I don't give a damn what they think, because I'm on my way up and the devil takes the hindmost. If one goes up another must go down. They can hardly fail to commission me. It's in the bag. Dear Lord, just give me a chance and I'll show them.

The V-V-B-S imported at great expense from Ottawa in the interest of the war effort takes the salute at the march past. The C.O. is most obsequious. I catch his eye where he stands modestly in the background and I permit myself the ghost of a mocking grin. He knows I know he's crawling. Why should I worry? He can do nothing for me now. In any case he'll end the war right here where he began it.

Then I was retained as an instructor. The course all commiserated with me at being left behind and I suppose the duller of them were sincere. I put on a great show of disappointment. Andy, from the next course, came over to see me and we analyzed the pros and cons of instruction. I thought it mightn't work out too well apart from the very important

safety of the pelt. Promotion, for example. Andy, seeing the bright side as always, suggested that, given time to practice in safety I'd be a ripsnorting navigator when they did draft me to operations "as of course they will." I suppressed the tart reply that I was a ripsnorting navigator already.

My synthetic wails of protest must have reached farther than I meant, for my first posting was canceled and I was duly posted overseas. With my new popeye braid making my arm ache I went on final leave. Andy had a few days too, so we nipped over the border, in civvies, and had a wonderful beat-up in Chicago. Do ask me sometime.

II

WE went to Hamburg one night. The briefing was more detailed than usual and the out and alternative home routes were to be decided just before take-off, as the false prophets were a little discouraged by the outcome of their previous night's forecasts. This means more work for the wretched navigators. Two sets of data to be prepared in time hardly adequate for one.

The gen about Hamburg is always a little intimidating. And this is early days, remember. The searchlight coverage is very good, so is the gun coordination. Besides which, there are God knows how many fighter stations ringed around it and, just to pile on the agony, the radio location is invariably very good too. Thorough! Fritz's way. Rumor spoke of 9.2's being used and of cones of hundreds of searchlights. Coming along?

There are two major routes of approach, one over land, the other a sea route. Naturally we prefer the sea route. Wouldn't you?

The final briefing ordered the land route and the target was indicated with extreme precision. What do they think we are? A curse on all this pinpoint stuff. Pip's view was (a) it was a lot of bloody lunacy, (b) it wasn't possible and (c) too many aircraft and their excellent crews are lost on propaganda stunts featuring precision bombing.

Still, a job is a job. I go along for a last minute nav. check. Pip does the same for the old girl. It's a chastening thought that for half the eight hundred miles we're going to be over enemy territory and he's bound to resent it all.

And so for the usual, after-dusk final touches. Look around for extra food (you never know your luck), leave behind all papers and documents other than those essential for the business of the evening, check watches, check all necessary equipment; and then there's always that deadly few minutes as one waits. Remember that bit in *Journey's End* where the older man engages the younger in a discussion about tea versus cocoa as beverages while they talk away the last few moments of their lives? We usually wait in silence.

This night we joke a little — you know how it is — every aircrew has its family jokes. Once in the aircraft things are much easier. We all have work to do but yet I'll swear we all have our ears cocked, as we always do, for the first coughing bellow as the cylinders fire. That always means "This is it!" The engines stutter a bit as they clear themselves and then settle down. They are warmed beforehand and we sense the familiar change in their notes as Pip gently pushes the throttles forward. Soon the old girl shakes with their thunder

as one after another they are raced at full throttle. The test satisfactory, the noise dies to the pleasant sound aircraft engines make as they tick over. Strange how very vividly all this fills my mind.

Anyway, they quicken a little and we lurch forward and waddle towards the runway to await our turn to take off. There's always a moment or two. Then all hell bursts loose as our horses roar their heads off. The bumps and jolts gradually decrease as the tail comes up, the acceleration seems to be forcing one backwards through the back of the seat. Now we are riding with only an occasional solid bump. Soon these too cease and the second dicky is winding up the legs.

Why am I giving you all this gen? To show I know the pilot ju-ju? Do I need to convince *you*? Or just because, when I write to you, by Christ, I'm right there, riding.

I verify time with Pip and get on with my job. You were right. A navigator is the loneliest soul under heaven. But who would swap that loneliness, that power?

Soon we cross the coast and there is our sea, steely gray below us in what remains of the light. I love the pattern wind lanes make on it but tonight is no time for admiration even if they were visible. The leader of a formation is as busy as a one-armed paperhanger. This is no time for beauty, unless it be the cold beauty of exact calculation. This is our first big do, the first time we lead.

I swear to myself that Pip will make a name as a leader if navigational skill can do anything for him. All the other required qualities he has in full measure, pressed down and running over. Just quietly, I have all he lacks, however little that may be. Still and all, he does *lack* it, and he does *need* it.

I begin making checks at absurdly short intervals. They

were largely unnecessary as the Met gen is good all the way. See how I'm identifying myself with Pip. We're giving nothing away, Pip and I.

Dead on E.T.A.* (Coast) there's the dirty line of the Dutch dunes and we spend a little time later dodging searchlights near Ostend. This valuable time has to be allowed for and made up later. Our escort turned back and wedged through the gaps. By this time all is known and the radio location boys down below are on the job, and there's some evidence of perturbation around the fighter airdromes down below. It's not possible to operate an airdrome in complete concealment but what interests me isn't what fun and games goes on below, but whether the bright R. L. boys have stacked up a squadron of fighters above us. Actually we see a couple of Me. 109s looking for trouble and one or two of those little Heinkels with the inverted gull wings. They're so small they look farther away than they are — you'd swear they're much farther away — an error of that kind can be fatal, as the little bastards carry cannon.

We slipped the first lot. We're a much better viewing platform than they are, but our luck runs out a little later. The formation tightened up but the last kite didn't weave as much as the tail guard should; result: they beat him up and he begins to fall back. We throttle back for him, to protect him as well as we can until the fighters run out of fuel or ammo or both, thereby imperiling our own E.T.A. already knocked about a bit by the delay at the coast. Even a well closed-up formation is no guarantee of safety when the fighters have cannon. Soon it's obvious we have to leave him. The heroic picture in the gutter press of a formation fighting its way

* Estimated time of arrival.

through swarms of fighters is just childish. It's not a battle on even terms, or why design fighters? No bomber *wants* to fight. If they have a really worthwhile bomb load they can't bristle with defensive armament. That's what's wrong with the so-called "Flying Fortresses." They fly high, they fly fast, they fly far, they're very well defended, but they don't carry any bombs. Or, at least, none to speak of. Did you hear the story of the one which made a forced landing on one of our fields, and before it could be checked, an absent-minded bombing crew had included it in the bomb load of one of our Stirlings? A wicked, wicked lie, no doubt.

Our straggler dropped still farther back. Pip's decision, now. Not mine, thank God. He jettisoned his cargo, but we know how it is. The fighters all leave us to concentrate on him. We imperil the whole show if we don't get moving. He knows how it is too.

The fighters curve in leisurely fashion, or so it looks to us; actually they're most businesslike. They'll concentrate on the tail gunner and do him in, and when he's gone for a Burton, they'll chew the aircraft up with stern attacks.

That's just what they do. As soon as the gap opens they blow his fin off and he goes into the deck on fire. Only Alec, in our tail turret, sees it, and he doesn't see any brollies in the hazy, shifting moonlight. Perhaps we're too far away. And we're in a hell of a hurry. The fighters want to do him in as speedily as possible so as to have fuel and ammo to tackle the exposed tail end. We want to put as much distance between us as possible, now that we are buying time and distance with aircraft and crews.

We bypass Bremen, almost as tough a nut as Hamburg, but we lose another poor sod to a fighter attack just to the

south. He seemed intact too; just slowly banked to starboard and went into a spin. Perhaps they got the pilots.

Hamburg is better camouflaged than anyone can imagine but I think we are on the target. Nothing compares remotely with Hamburg. Brest, Bremen, Berlin, the three B's, are nothing to it.

Yet miracles are with us. First in, and nobody cares. The lights cone behind us, the fighters quarter behind us too. How come we are missed? And for how long?

What's the use of talking. It was bloody hell I tell you. No man should be asked to go to Hamburg.

What's the use of talking. Most of us gather at the rendezvous. We take the sea route home, after looking around for stragglers — but not for long.

Homeward bound. Sea route. Wonderful. The only questions now are navigational ones, so children, leave it all to your uncle and don't bother your pretty little heads about intellectual matters. Trust your uncle. Now there are no lights and fighters and great greasy blobs in the sky.

Then, two of our kites go into the drink at various times going home. Each time my stomach tightens. How are we?

Both pilots do good ditching jobs. The sea lights are alight, and dinghies pop out and I suppose most of the crews are able to scramble aboard. We note their positions but it's too close to the enemy coast in both cases for us to signal help for them. The A.S.R.S.* would have given it a go but Fritz monitors the radio and he'd get there first. So we report them on arrival.

Watching them go in, one circles and waits. Then the aircraft hits, nose up, and floats for a few minutes. Christ,

* Air-Sea Rescue Service.

there's a lot to do in that few minutes. And everyone inside gets a hell of a smack when she stops from about a hundred m.p.h. down to nothing almost instantaneously. We watch. And we think, "Thank Christ I'm not those poor bastards. Going to spend days in a bloody little dinghy."

Row their guts out with little paddles strapped on their hands. Ration the concentrated food and double-ration the water. Get seasick. Cruelly. Get wet if it's rough, baked if it's hot. The wounded moan like a voice out of hell. Don't listen. Apply dressings. Give them pills to deaden the pain. Or to quiet them so it won't madden the rest — which? And above all, don't listen or the sound will drown you. And all this time unable to move without touching the others. Perhaps for a week.

Home at dawn; memories of happier, civvy days; home at dawn: home.

Pip sat her down sweetly, and why should I mention that? He always did. But when we are home, I know that when they grounded me they knew what they were doing. We'll just bury it here. I couldn't have been an operational pilot. I haven't the iron that's in Pip. My imagination is a curse. It's lucky for me I didn't know how badly the second dicky was shot up. I'd have frozen to the controls when the fighters staged their last desperate head-on attack. But Pip's different. When there are broadside attacks he'll watch and inevitably, at precisely the right moment, he'll turn towards the right attacker. It's a quality that I can't explain. Neither can Pip. But he has it.

Strange that I could have imagined us untouched tonight. Jesus, I *must* have been busy. Or plain panicked.

Strange about Pip too. In some ways I'm a better man

than he is. All these feats of navigation which were getting talked about couldn't be pure chance. You know that better than anyone. The simple fact is that I was bloody good.

Navigators are rare. They shouldn't be wasted. Some day every formation will be led to its target by a navigation aircraft bristling with navigators and defensive armament, carrying no bomb load and sent out ahead of the rest to mark the target with flares. Not like what happened to me later, but a much more precise thing. It'd be so nice to have markers in the sky, but the wind would carry them right off the point where they were laid.

Life's a bit like that, too.

12

MINE-LAYING is an odd job. We used to go to the Baltic and lay them in the steamer lanes, as near as Intelligence could guess them, in the pious hope that some ore ship would nudge one. I don't imagine anything *could* sink as fast as one of these. The crews must feel worse than the boys on tankers or in submarines.

The routine is a little different too. The false prophets give the good word as to when, but as no Met wallah is ever willfully precise, there's always a tentative air about the proceedings.

Then, with a belly full of mines we waddle out on to the flare path. Mines we're supposed to bring back if we can't find our target point. All right, all right, all that's nonsense I know. But it used to be so.

There's something more intimidating about mines than about bombs. Don't ask me why. There's no logic in it. It probably goes back to stories of the last war. The actual laying of a mine is a very difficult job too. It's a very low-altitude job and there are quite sticky problems in deciding which is sea and which sky. But the really delicate operation of the evening consists in arriving at the predetermined point without interception. It's a very exact point too, and there's not much to come and go upon.

The first time we were briefed for the job, Pip's face was a study. He doesn't believe, any more than anyone else, all the propaganda boys say about the enemy not playing the game and we do — all that sort of guff — but mine-laying was something he just didn't like. You see he'd worked on wharves all his life and he had strong feelings about ships and didn't want to destroy them. He hated the idea.

The Met and Nav gen were much more detailed than usual. We had already had plenty of training in the technique of dumping them, though Pip always hoped it would never come to that. When we walked away, Pip's rumbling murmur ran something like this. "Ships is different. Bloody different. And the crews don't get no sirens to warn them and there's no funk holes to dive into. Bloody shame it's got to be ships . . ."

He was turning the whole matter over in his mind as the short winter's day closed in all around us. These jobs are winter jobs. The long nights are necessary owing to the distances to be covered without escort.

Pip's ruminating became a sort of *obligato*. His conception of a ship as a semi-living thing is, of course, nothing new. He volunteered, rather shamefacedly, when he felt the old tramps still gamely plugging away had guts and that fish-

ing boats were, to his mind, rather like friendly dogs. He meant trawlers, naturally. Sailing ships were just "hell ships" or "sailors' poorhouses" and the like. He supposed some people thought them beautiful. He'd seen pictures of them from that point of view. But what on earth was biting folk who knew so little of the facts of a sailor's life?

Ships! And now he was going to do them in. Oh well. War's war.

It was an overcast night, I remember. We thunder along finding it hard to come unstuck with all that extra fuel, plus the mines in the belly. Rather reluctantly, I thought, she pulled clear. So here we are, my bold sea raiders.

Pip held her down until we had enough airspeed and then we began to climb on track. It's a busy time for me, but I have time later to watch the gunners ceaselessly moving their turrets in arcs to cover all their sky. Even if they are all asleep, the vigilant movement is comforting to watch. We are over the sea and low down. There's a curtain of stratus mush above us that shuts out everything. When some of the fuel is gone we'll climb through it and have a look at the stars. All this is routine stuff. Once one's ears become accustomed to the noise everything becomes routine stuff. Did you know that, after the war, nearly all aircrew will have impaired hearing? Sounds odd, but it's true.

Anyway, we plug away in the grayness. Night vision doesn't matter when all is gray, sea and sky alike. There's nothing much for me to do now. There's nothing much for anybody to do. If the Met gen is okay, we're on track and all is well. Why worry and get thin legs? The gunners cover their sky but the chance of an intercept hardly exists. I'll bet there's a perfunctory look about the gaze they turn on the great outdoors.

Presently comes: "Captain to navigator; let's have a look at the bloody stars." We break cloud at about ten thousand feet only to find ourselves sandwiched. There was another layer above us. There we were stooging along in the clear space between the sheets. Lovely. And if the Met patter is right there's no real reason why we shouldn't just stay here. All the same, you know what we did. Yes, yes, Little Eric must be satisfied, so we plunge into the upper cloud base and climb out into moonlight. I go rapidly about my patter and get a wizard fix. Everything just too good. So I rechecked. Still all right. Wonderful!

I felt I owed myself a look around. You were right.

The tumbled tops of the cloud blanket are silver, the valleys between them dark gray, and somehow I always believe them to be breaks and the grayness to be sea. The moon is bright enough to damp out the minor stars so that the principal navigational ones are sharply defined. Their familiarity is positively friendly. Foolish, of course, to think of a mass of flaming gas millions of miles away as friendly. Might as well be an astrologer and navigate with a little crystal ball. Still, everyone needs something to feel friendly and human about. Even you. And I know the light I see left the star millions of years ago. What of it? I love stars.

And this lovely night, in the silence and stillness . . . oh yes, after a while the noise is not consciously heard and there's no sensation of motion at all. I repeat, in the silence and the stillness I thought of that little bit from "A Navigator's Song" . . . you know . . .

*The silent, silver stars
Are all our guide tonight.*

*Oh Lord who marks the sparrow's flight
Guide Thou my hand aright.*

All right. All right, doggerel no doubt. But I like it. It ends: "I come among you, star-faring."

Had I survived this I'd have liked to enter my calling in official publications as "star-farer." Wouldn't it be a sell for me if there's really something in the rather naïve Early Christian view of a heaven among the stars? For me the firmament is a sea of stars and I'm sure Leif Ericson and Magellan will back me up.

I'll never forget that night. I'll remember it until there's an end to all remembering. And I believe it's soon. The dressings seem more nauseating every day. Not that *I* know, but the staff seem to find them that way. So I'll remember that night; the tumbled clouds below, the stars above, and the world for a little space peaceful and human and kind.

We hopped in between the sandwich for the neck of Denmark and then went up for a final check. Everything is going so well we're sure to disappoint the I.O. Then down we come to break cloud over the sea. And curse it, the cloud base has fallen and is sitting on the sea. Well? Isn't that a help? There'll be no possible interference. Oh, yes, but there's one hell of a danger with mines. We have to come right down on the sea to lay them. See now? The sea and the cloud are one as far as we are concerned. Which is which?

This condition is quite common in the Baltic: low cloud, sea fog and slate-gray sea. Remember it was night, too. Aircraft lost on mine-laying probably go into the sea through all this. Or else they see it too late and fail to pull out in time. We know this. And we're anxious. Who wouldn't be? Sensi

tive altimeters are grand things, when you can set them, knowing the atmospheric pressure at sea level. We couldn't. So we come down the last few hundred feet with a caution you can imagine.

Still, the check was so good that, at any rate, we're not going to hit an island as some poor bastards have done. Putting the mines over the side, as the Navy would say, has been so often practiced that we could do it blindfolded; which is about what we are in the fog.

Homeward bound and everyone's spirits rising. It's a piece of cake. Warm feelings towards the Met wallahs come all over us. Dear fellows! Of course, there's always the enemy radio location to bear in mind. Still we're on our own and it's scarcely likely that the Hun will bother his head over a solitary aircraft. Surely to God he has more important things to do.

Let's count our blessings. Here's the list, Pip.

1. Homeward Bound.
2. Undetected (so far).
3. Sandwich of clouds for refugees from interceptors.
4. Fuel more than half gone which means much better performance. Let's see it, Pip.

The world is fine. Next time a star winks at me I'll wink back. They've done their stuff. I've done mine. We're a great team, the stars and I.

We're a great team too. Aren't we, Pip?

Now here's a queer one. We've been together a long time, apart from a running sequence of second dickys. Now, why do I not remember any of them? Am I still hankering after that seat? Am I still resenting being grounded? Do I still want to be a pilot?

Back into the sandwich to cross Denmark. The country's

so flat we can't bump a thing unless it's an unusually tall Dane, even for a Dane. In any case, what's an unusually tall Dane doing out of his unusually long bed at this hour?

Out over the top again for a look-see. Same old moon, same old stars. All a bit out of position since last look but who cares? Another good fix. Everything dovetails beautifully. What a world! What a night!

We ought to make the coast soon. We're right on the water and, sure enough, there's the thin edge of white that waves always show at the coastline and the darker line in the grayness is England, home and breakfast. What beautiful thoughts pass through the mind on these topics; bacon and egg (singular), bed and quiet — especially quiet. All at once, just at that moment, I heard the engines. The thought of quietness, I suppose. And why should the thought of quietness bring an ore ship into my mind?

The I.O. was acutely disappointed. No, we hadn't seen any fighters. No, we didn't get any visual fixes. No, we noticed nothing unusual over Denmark. No, we didn't even *see* Denmark. No, there had been no unusual air incident. No, we had nothing to report. He looked so very disappointed I nearly told him who pinched all the cocoa — but that's no unusual incident either.

Mine-laying is a piece of cake, a wonderful piece of cake. This time.

I3

A STATION is a happy enough place. The Old Man is usually quite harmless and in any case the Admin. O. and the adju-

tants do the work. There's a rash of commissioned grocers and drapers who do their particular jobs at least as well as anybody else and there's a grand bunch of I.O.s who have to make head or tail of some mighty odd affairs. Sometimes they're bright boys but more often they're just steady hard workers. Sometimes sessions with them are a bit of a bore, especially for navigators who are their special prey. By and large though they do know the score, or rather, the part of the score it is their portion to know. The Engineer Officers are good guys and do really know their work, and the same goes for the R.L.* boys.

But it's the N.C.O.s and other ranks who really make the wheels turn over. Around the station you'll see the maintenance crews getting about their business. Sometimes a new N.C.O. will try to march them beyond the limit of the discipline they have set for themselves and they'll jeer at him in a way to warm a New Zealand heart. All the "spit and polish" is plain nonsense. An ex-Army N.C.O. told me that good discipline is shown by good work. It has no other object. As much discipline as the job demands: no more, and decidedly, no less. Coming from an ex-Army type, that nearly emboldened me to ask him why he transferred to the Air Force.

I hope you'll agree with me that ceremonial is the refuge of little men, unsure of themselves and so very keen to conceal from others the poor opinion they have formed of themselves.

All this leaves out the visitors from Air Ministry. Usually they have small practical knowledge; they know little, but they know somebody. Somebody who knows somebody who knows etc. We all think it's influence which does it, and I

* Radio location.

think we're right. The whole show is top-heavy with people for whom "a suitable position in uniform" must be found. The deference of really able people towards these gilded nin-compoops must be seen to be believed. In our country we treat our snobocracy with a tolerant contempt, but here it's different. Blokes who've been to the Rabbit Warren assure me that the broad braid is to be seen by the furlong and that the area of backside apple-polishing in carpeted offices is roughly equivalent to that of a medium-sized airfield: say five hundred acres. Of course all these chair-borne warriors drip with gongs. Why not? They award them to each other.

Back to the station. Aircraft being run up, bomb trains all over the place, little trails of aircrew heading for briefing, blokes out on the airfield jacking everything up for the night.

War is lunacy. But the sanest place in the whole asylum is squarely on the station.

Even a madhouse is home if you get used to it. Think of New Zealand. We are so cut off from the rest of the world that we don't recognize our own forms of lunacy till we get outside. Shall I tell you about the asylum I grew up in?

I4

IN the beginning there was a very small boy and a very big river. A poverty-stricken home in a small, drab New Zealand town. It rained endlessly. The ferns and the native forest were a tangled riot right up to the outskirts of the wretched wood and corrugated-iron houses which straggled into un-

tidy streets on either side of the river. This river was turbulent, often flooded, and small ships used it at peril, but I grew up beside it. You may say that it shaped me, even to the thoughts. Of course I knew no other place, so at the time it seemed a pleasant enough home town. It *was* home, you see.

That river. I built flatties of rough timber and rowed on its surface. I fished there too, for whitebait. I remember, like yesterday, the chilly vigil for long hours before dawn to obtain a good rock from which big catches were certain. Round me other fishermen gradually took shape in the misty dawn light as the cold valley wind poured long wisps of vapor around us. All of us intently watched the river. Will they run today?

If they run I intend to buy myself gum boots. At the thought my bare feet curl up a little in happy anticipation. The river is cold but the valley wind is colder, which accounts for the mist. If there's a really big run, I'll buy a sailor's jersey as well.

Stiffly, I walked to school. How I hated to leave the river when the tide was right for a good run. All the same I noticed where the coal trucks stood in the railway yards. There might be an opportunity to do something about that tonight, whether they run or not.

At school I was the odious "bright boy." Years younger than the others, who hated and despised me. Looking back, I don't blame them. I'd despise me. Yet there was an element, almost of fear, in their attitudes. I was a ruthless, cold-blooded, sharp-tongued intellectual snob from the cradle up. So they caught me alone as often as they could. Do you blame them? My brother was clever too, but he had the sense not to

parade it; indeed he concealed it most skillfully. Besides he was much better at games than I was. The teachers endeavored to conceal a half-fascinated loathing. I was a liar, a thief, I had an excuse for everything when I was caught, and I was a physical coward. Yet all they required of me, and more, I did to their complete and grudging satisfaction. And if I did steal, there was a certain necessity about that because I had to have books and there were no such things as libraries — not for the likes of me. So I stole anything of value, although once I stole a toy and then couldn't bear to turn it into books. Occasionally I was caught but no one took my books away. My mother began to fear that I was reading too much for the good of my health but I easily outwitted her as soon as I was able to loosen one of the boards in the filthy old privy. Whenever I hear a joke about reading matter for lavatories my youth stands and looks at me in the eye.

When I was eleven, I had read, much of it in that odd library, most of Scott, Dickens and Stevenson, all of Shakespeare — and most of it passed right over my dazed head — and a great deal of romantic poetry. I was drunk on words and have remained that way.

I worked systematically through the Authorized Version once it was drawn to my attention that a boy with a good knowledge of the Bible could fairly mow down the prizes at Sunday school, and they were all books. I did very well and, at the end of the year, I was presented with the complete works of Hesba Stretton. Has anyone heard of Hesba Stretton these days? Anyway, disappointment so overwhelmed me that I, there and then, expressed in a few well-chosen words, a somewhat pungent literary criticism of Hesba Stretton. Later, when I swapped Hesba for a Boswell, I realized what

a goat I'd been to dry up such a regular source of swapping material. It was too late then, of course. The Sunday school had cast out the viper from its bosom.

Before this my mother fell ill so I didn't offend her sense of respectability by mentioning the Sunday school. She was ill for a whole nightmare year. My brother and I took turns "minding" her. On alternate days we went to school and we taught each other in the evenings. That might have been fun for both of us but by evening we were desperately tired.

I can remember my brother seated on the post of our gate, where he could keep an eye on Mother and at the same time, watch the other children playing in the street. I heard him refuse to join them because "I have to mind my mother." And he was eight.

All that year she lay in bed and the doctor said she would die. We didn't ask him often. He cost too much and had to be paid as he left the house, my mother insisted. You see, we were honest folk, though poor: thus my mother. So we didn't call the doctor unless we were very frightened and we always consulted each other, because the fee so honestly tendered to the doctor meant food. And we had a baby sister to think about, too. Besides, the doctor always told the neighbors that our mother would die. They were very compassionate and did what they could for us, but my brother and I knew she would not die. It is true that only her eyes were alive, but how undoubtedly, intensely alive they were. And we knew, we knew, we knew she would not die. We often told each other so. At night, by candlelight, we read her *Little Women* and the like, which we both privately despised, but we liked to see the odd, contented look in her eyes and the wrinkles slowly smoothing themselves on her face. We thought it was

due to the descriptions of placid family life, so unlike our own. So we used to mark those passages and skip the rest. And I was ten.

Now, I'm not much different from her. Except that she was going to live. She knew she was not going to die. We knew it too. As I lie here I don't dare think of what I know, so I'll think of myself when young — myself as a child at school, when life was all future. Time must move backwards for me now. My past is all I have left. But it was a rich time.

And I was so physically alive then, too. Oh, yes, I was small for my age, but I could run like a hare. Yes, and dodge like one, too. There wasn't much time for games, but sometimes on the way home I stopped for a little while to play Prisoners Base, a game which put a premium on speed and dodging. I wonder if anyone plays it now? I loved it. Primarily because it suited my abilities, and also because no one got hurt in the game. Even at that age I had my own pelt in full view.

One of the masters at the school yearned to turn me into a halfback, a prospect which filled me with horror. By pleading my inability to stay for the after-school practices I staved him off for a long time until, one day, he discovered I had lunch at school. That tore it. He was in a position to compel me to play, because he was a teacher and that office also gave him license to abuse me as a "gutless coward." He was right, of course.

When the Selection Committee asked me about sport, I made up a moderately good autobiography, framed with care to make it quite untraceable. It featured team games and manly sports, because Selection Committees run to that sort of thing. I didn't draw to their several attentions that to me a manly sport always involved a girl.

Where was I? Playing Prisoners Base and growing towards ten. And meekly enduring my brother's reproaches for being late home. From where he sat, "minding Mother," he could see the children playing in the road, and it was his turn to go out when I came home from school. He grew irritable watching them play Prisoners Base.

Making money. Ever tried to? It all happened because we had a baby sister. Perhaps it wouldn't have mattered if the neighbors hadn't acquired a daughter at about the same time. It was my brother who drew the situation to my attention.

The baby girl opposite had the prettiest baby clothes and, while such things scarcely counted with boys, it was a serious matter with girls who were notoriously different in this line. Thus my brother. Which left the problem squarely where it belonged: in my lap.

We talked it over a good deal. Almost at once we rejected the idea of making anything ourselves, because it was clear there were catches in it. So we had to make some money.

Our first attempt was fishing, because we had seen flounders for sale at half a crown a bundle, and that measure of wealth was almost unbelievable. I think we sat for three days with our homemade hooks before we decided to give up the idea. It was only later we discovered that flounders were caught in nets. We tried to make a net but it used up too much string.

Then inspiration came to me: literary inspiration. We read *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* to each other for the money-making ideas that were so plentiful there. The pity was that none of them applied to a New Zealand small town where everyone did their own mowing, painting and

the like. In any case we were a lot younger than our heroes and not many people would trust a nine-year-old with paint.

Now, while we were fishing many folk passed us on their way to the bridge upstream. My brother had a very bright idea. The bridge was undoubtedly in a bad position since the road ended on the riverbank near where we fished but the bridge was nearly a mile upstream. Of course another road led to it but there was no denying, said my brother, that a ferry would be a howling success. The construction of the ferryboat took us weeks. For reasons of strength and carrying capacity we made it of corrugated roofing iron and fixed two outriggers alongside from which we, the ferrymen, proposed to operate sweeps. You will see at once that the whole of the commodious interior was thus reserved for revenue earning. We ran into debt, however, during the construction. Lead-headed nails, for example, were one of those things we just couldn't make.

Still the launching date did eventually arrive. It was the devil's own job getting our boat down to the water, partly because of its weight, chiefly because we had to keep everything secret in case our plans were interfered with by adults. No nine-year-old ever really knows where he is with adults.

It was very early in the morning when we were finally in a position to edge our hopes gently into the water. It sank at once.

We could see it easily where it lay on the bottom, once the stirred-up mud had subsided. By now we were inured to the failure of our schemes but I think we both cried a little, each with his back to the other. You see, we were in debt. A shilling.

Then we tried to salvage the wreck. We didn't dare ask for

help either. We feared the laughter that would surely follow. I remember my brother saying: "Do you think, if we pulled them out very carefully, and straightened them afterwards . . . the ironmonger would take the lead-heads back?" I looked at the lead-heads . . . driven erratically by small boys so sure of financial success that drawing them out again didn't occur to either. I looked at the crumpled heads and the twisted shanks, and wondered somberly about that shilling.

In the end I stole it. I worked one day for my brother on his bread-cart job and I stole a shilling out of the change. So we were out of debt. It's a wonderful feeling of relief to know one's out of debt.

Years later I called on my employer of that day at his home. I put half a crown on the table in front of him. "Conscience money," said I. He looked at it for a moment and then said mildly, "It was only a shilling." "Interest for twelve years," said I. He spun the coin on the table and kept his eyes on it. "I knew your father and mother," he said. "And your sister and brother. Now I think I know you. I'll have a hole bored in it and wear it on my watch chain."

"Half of it is my brother's," I pointed out. He blinked for a moment and then said very quietly, "Of course." He held the coin against his watch chain and we both looked at it. "Did you toss to decide who was to give it to me?" I nodded. He looked down at the coin again, tapped it with his finger. "Tell him!" "Of course!" said I.

The situation about our baby sister still faced us. What to do? Then we did what wiser people would have done much earlier. We dropped in, by a carefully contrived accident, on

a woman we knew who worked in a shop where such things were sold. We told her as much as we thought necessary but then she questioned us at such length that she dragged a lot of embarrassing detail from us. In the end we did discover the price of the things we had in mind, but — who on earth ever had all that money?

Then all our troubles evaporated. We took a boarder!

The woman from the baby shop called on our mother and asked to stay with us. As my mother was bedridden, the whole thing was a deep mystery to us, but how wonderfully everything changed for the better. Our boarder used to get our breakfast before she went to work, she gave us cold lunches and put food beside my mother. When she came home from work, she bathed our sister and prepared her for the night. The neighbors did a like office during the day. During the weekends, she cleaned the house, saw that we were bathed, cooked for the week ahead and was visited by the man she was "going with."

Six years later our boarder married, went to live on a back-blocks farm, reared a large family and, I hope, lived happily ever after.

15

It then became essential for me to win a scholarship, for I was in my last year at primary school. I was lucky. The teacher coached me ruthlessly. I know he disliked me but he said I was to have a scholarship if it killed us both, and it jolly

nearly did. Perhaps he pitied me because the odds were all against my chances, in a field up to four years older. Perhaps he got some sort of pleasure out of doing his best for me regardless of how he felt about the sharp little twerp I must have seemed.

Behold me, then, on my first day at high school. My vices you already know, but add to them, clean but woefully patched clothing of an outmoded style, the peaked look peculiar to those whose meals are porridge, very filling at the time but pitifully inadequate towards midday, and a talent for making enemies unsurpassed since Caligula. My youth and physical frailty were added insults to my elders and betters. I was so small that the school furniture was much too large for me. The other boys were too big for me, too. They used to conspire to walk behind me and tramp on my heels until the bone showed. This treatment formed hideous sores, and sleep became a problem, but my eyes were on matriculation and the sooner the better; so the formative years moved on.

Formative influences. First, after my books comes the influence of my father. Have you wondered why it has taken me so long to get around to him? Books: my father: perhaps I should say that, as my father introduced me to books, the two influences reinforced or supplemented each other, so that in these years I have difficulty in distinguishing between what I learned from my father and what I learned from books.

You must meet my father. He was the town drunkard and his passion for gambling was the complement of his heavy drinking. Yet there was something — call it what you like — a sort of flame, and he was to kindle it in me. Gosh, how

Victorian that sounds. The only thing in its favor is that it's true and I can't say it in any other way. Does he sound something like the "lovable drunk" who is the stock-in-trade of some American novelists? They might have found my father lovable, but he found them false, and that to him was unpardonable in an artist. He despised them. No one, not even I, quite despised my father. He was so gentle. Yet he could be so gently firm. That is when all his weaknesses didn't get in the way of his firmness.

A small boy lay on a hot beach and watched the combers curl over and break. A very proper occupation for a summer's day and a small boy, both of which are made for each other. But did you know that just before it breaks, the water is so thin that you can see the light through it, and it's yellow — yes, yellow — not green, but yellow. It was so this day, and a few gulls winnowed back and forth. Scavenging, of course. But beautiful, just the same.

Very nice companionable silence. My father's voice scarcely broke it. "Your mother is rather wonderful. All women are like that, really." That was all the sex instruction he ever volunteered and all he thought necessary. I have often wished I had lived up to it. You see, my father was a weakling, a drunken gambler for pittances, but from him I learned all that I subsequently found beautiful in life. I don't drink much and I don't gamble at all — at least, not with money — but all the other splendid qualities of my father I lack. Had I his courage, his tolerance, his strangely aloof breadth of view, his patience; why should I write to you?

He knew how to live and he learned how to die.

Perhaps you think of him as a sort of dissolute Mr. Chips? Oh no. For one thing, he wasn't dissolute. That would imply a littleness or meanness of soul. Not that he hadn't been around. My mother told me that she had been warned about him, right and left. She knew that when he left her, the rest of the night was devoted to a selection of the ladies of the town. She knew he drank to excess, but she was confident she could reform him. Perhaps because she couldn't fail to know she was on a very special footing. As she told me shortly before she died: "Your father was so respectful to me." Then she laughed a little. "And when we were married I didn't even know. Oh, well; it doesn't matter." Poor Mother. "And somehow, long before he said anything I knew it was him or no one. If he'd said to me, 'Let's go and live on a desert island' I wouldn't even have asked which one."

When he was young, I believe he must have been handsome, but it was his bubbling gaiety which my mother best remembered. I had not ever known him that way but mother would dredge her memory and bring forth the oddest examples. "Of course," she assured me, "he was very handsome, and half the women in the street where we lived use to call to him as he went by. Nothing to take exception to, but *if* he had given them any encouragement — there was something about him that reminded women that they *were* women — he could turn it on and off like a light. After that," said Mother firmly, "he was the most loyal man who ever lived." I couldn't resist the dig "And did he ever try it on you?" Mother blushed. "I'm an old woman," she said. "Oh, well, once. And I remember it like yesterday, and him years dead. I've been a very lucky woman."

My father was the last of a long line of drunkards on both sides of his family and nobly he maintained the family tradi-

tion. Little by little, he sank lower and lower. When we were small he worked on the wharves. *When* he worked. Long hours in those days and heavy — brutally heavy — work. Yet the long hours and the heavy work, which must have been agony for him, never marred the serenity of his spirit or the sincerity of his drinking. I was his other passion. My brother was much more likable really, and I would readily admit it. He was my father's usual companion, but I had him most often alone. All this, while my mother lay still, all her life in her eyes. How were we to know that she would outlive him by over a decade? Two small boys couldn't know. But their father did. I wonder where my father picked up his extraordinary education. My mother had no idea. None of us ever asked. Yet everything he told me came true in the testing, even when uncomprehended at the time. As . . .

"And a cry of 'Thalatta, thalatta,' ran down the ranks. Yes, the sea.

"So the ten thousand Greeks weren't lost any more, they had come home."

Greek was Greek to me but, across the dumb centuries, Xenophon spoke to my father and he told me. And how I felt for the wretched slave boy being questioned by Socrates. And how quiet it was when the *Phaedo* had moved to its quiet end: "Thus died our friend, the wisest, noblest and best man that has ever lived." Hear him? Hear me from under his long shadow! You cast a long shadow too. Do recognize Everyman when you see him. If this accursed war spares you and doesn't destroy the essential you in passing, why then, you'll grow to know why I write to you. If that is the reason.

And do you care if, when he quoted Shakespeare sonnets,

he almost certainly had my mother in mind? And wouldn't she be surprised. Yes, surprised, and more than a little puzzled. Of course I checked what I could of the quotations in my library.

Do you get any glimpse of him through all this?

He loved me devotedly. My brother, too. When we were very small people used to say, "Here comes the man with the babies." Yes, we were the apple of his eye. Yet the publicans wore my gold medals on their watch chains and a small, frightened boy collected his father and took him home when the pubs closed at nine. It was so hard to keep awake outside and there were false alarms when patrons left early. When I timidly pushed in, barmen offered a drink of raspberry or shoved lunch across the counter, but we had been told never to touch it or we might become drunkards too. I suppose I must have looked dead to the world, asleep on my feet, so they silently watched me take my father away. Do you know I've never tasted raspberry and I often ached for the food?

Then, one day, Mother moved her head. Definitely moved her head. We both saw it. It didn't just aimlessly droop or loll. It moved. And her eyes showed that she knew. Four months later she walked again. Slowly and very painstakingly we taught her. She was so heavy to support and we didn't dare risk a fall. If only she could take up the household work again, and we could play as other children did; and how we longed for just that. But we were afraid to hurry the process and eventually we had our reward. Then we found that we had grown away from our contemporaries and had forgotten how to play. We were years older than they were.

About this time it became clear that we must go to work

after school. We lied flatly about our ages but I don't think we deceived anyone. Still, I worked in a printing press, inside the machines, and when the paper broke I called to the operator who stopped the press. My brother worked on a baker's cart. He was more exposed to the weather but he had better opportunities for stealing pies and buns, and best of all, he didn't have to contend with the perpetual roar and crash of the press which exploded in my head long after I was in bed. However, I could frequently steal the last few copies from the press and try to sell them on the streets so, although he was the better fed, I was the better financed.

We hated each other a little as boys of an age will do. But we combined well against strangers. My brother was growing bigger than I and was of much more help to my father in the little jobs they did together. Besides he was handy in practical things where I was clumsy. I wonder if I really did scheme for a share of my father? It's hard to tell at this distance, but I do believe that I cultivated an interest in music and plays with that end in view. My father used to whistle operatic arias to me, or the theme of a symphony, he had a marvelous ear which I wish I had inherited. When I couldn't reproduce them, I used, as skillfully as possible, to sidetrack him on to drama. He drew the scenes for me and took all the parts.

What began, I suppose, as a ruse, became of absorbing interest to us both.

I wonder where he heard that music, saw those plays.

Then I won another scholarship, a further medal or two and matriculation followed. I was too young to go to University, and in any case, an idea so absurd never entered my head, at least, not for public consumption. What to do?

So I began to teach. It was that or the public service. I was smaller than some of my pupils and younger, too. I wonder why no one followed up my failure to produce a birth certificate. As it was, everyone else had a job by February, but it was April before I got a start. I became a "pupil teacher," a sort of apprentice, and I suppose I was a very poor one. Too frightened. Until I found that my acid tongue could keep discipline for me, at least in the classroom. I often wondered what I would do if I were "waited for" as I had been while a pupil at this same school. As it was I had to teach in boy's shorts, until I had earned enough to buy men's longs. But once I wore long trousers and the class still wore their shorts, there was no further possibility of trouble. I was a teacher and entitled to be called "sir."

Some of the pupil-teachers were girls, which ensured agonies of shyness on my part and half-wondering acceptance on theirs. I think they regarded me rather as a medieval court would a particularly sharp-witted dwarf. I did a great deal of their work for them and I even took an occasional reproof for one or another of them. At the time I wondered why I did these things and impatiently recalled my previous concentration on saving my own skin. I also became, for me, quite sensitive about what people thought of me. How was I to know that the onset of adolescence had upset all my values? Oh, adolescence is a rebirth all right, but no one realizes that at the time.

One day a girl kissed me, for a joke. I now know that she

was merely practicing on a lay figure something she should have reserved for the climax of intercourse. Yes, it was one of those kisses. I was so profoundly shaken that I didn't kiss another girl for a very long time. Even now, the scent of the cheap powder she used will drift uncalled across my mind with an eroticism that nothing since has ever equalled.

She subsequently married a policeman, had many children, grew very fat, failed to recognize me when we met again and treated me with some deference when she found out who I was. But to me, she will always be the red-haired child-woman who practiced her sexuality on me.

By now I was better dressed and not so angularly famished. My speech, copied sedulously from my father's, was quiet and slow and perhaps just a shade precious. That's one of the perils of a too careful imitation. Of course, if I was really interested the words tumbled over each other in their eagerness to make thought patterns. Lord, how I loved to talk! Still do. Hence all this writing to you. You're my audience, and I love you, my dear, dear public. Don't mind all that; all I mean is I love to talk.

People began to listen to me and I experienced the heady delights of an impromptu audience. Obviously I was odd, but equally obviously, I had brains and I was wryly amusing. You know, as I run over things in my mind I'm not sure if I'm describing you or me. The sure sign of successful climbing was the folk who extended invitations to me. Once indeed, the doctor who brought me into the world. Well, well. Yet, on these visits I was always in fear of some solecism or other which would undo all the good work. I began to lie more carefully, and to a pattern. The old careless improvisations were laid aside.

One Sunday evening I was returning from a visit to some friends of the newer order. The son of the house, about my age or a little older, and I, were escorting his cousin to her home. Halfway, she remembered that her home was on my route so she decided that there was no need for him to come farther. We walked on alone, along the river's edge where the lupins grew tall. Presently we found ourselves at full length among them and the scent of lupin flowers was heavy on the air. Lupin flowers on a hot summer's night, the astringent smell of the crushed leaves and green stems, the little crackle of dry seed pods as we turned towards each other.

Not that I noticed this at the time. There seem to be a lot of things I didn't notice at the time. How, for example, did I discover that she had nothing — yes, nothing — under her frock? It was a light summer frock, too. How in the world did she get away with it? Yes, yes, so many things not to notice; the practiced way in which the lady prepared herself for seduction, making herself as comfortable as one can on lupins; her obvious need, and her manifest satisfaction with me.

Perhaps my abashed eagerness stirred her jaded desires — yes, jaded at eighteen! She taught me the most exciting sexual caresses, and I first learned, there in the lupins, that what I did to her excited her as much as it did me. I suppose I was pretty oblivious of the extremely talented performance that was, probably, wasted on me. I do know that few people, apart from Marian, have even approached her virtuosity.

Next morning I suddenly began to fear consequences, not for her, but for me. For the nine days that gutter sex knowledge required I endured agonies of apprehension and self-examination, then hied me to a doctor. Oh yes, it's funny now but it wasn't at the time.

Naturally, I never saw her again. But does anyone ever forget the first one? I don't pretend there was anything more to it than a couple of animals in heat; there wasn't. But it gives me a better understanding of our dumb friends.

I have since tried upon many people the exciting things she taught me, to their, and my satisfaction. Every young person should be initiated into sex by someone of experience and skilled in that delicate and sophisticated cooperation.

The knowledge of one's ability to awaken desire is a heady thing. An arrogant thing. As the lady's resistance weakens there's a fierce and fiery delight in being a man. But the fire dies.

17

THE letter in the rack was the usual one. I'd been touring the east coast and I had my very good reason for not wishing my address known. My mother's pointed handwriting, so obviously learned a generation ago. I put the letter in my pocket and strolled along the corridor to work. Mother always collated all the family news but I hadn't had any for a few weeks.

An hour or so later I had a chance to look at the letter.

" . . . we didn't know how to get in touch with you. Your father died a fortnight ago . . . "

I went on with my work. What else to do? . . . a fortnight ago . . . Nothing to do or say now.

I carried the letter around for several days before I could

bring myself to read the rest. Probably because I knew what it would contain. I knew it would tell me, in my mother's bare, factual way, the whole grisly story. Mother never missed details.

My father had been ill for a little time, I knew. You know how I hate illness and that, somehow, enabled me to put him out of mind. And now he was out of mind for ever.

In due course I went home.

My mother was lost as a widow. My father had brought her nothing but misery. He had forced her to fight him for food for the children, his drunkenness had ruined every chance for a better life which she so laboriously built for him, the humiliations she suffered no drunk could possibly imagine. And he had been the one great passion of her life. She was lost as a widow.

My brother looked at me coldly. "Like to hear about it?" he asked. "Whether you like it or not you're going to hear about it. Sit down!" I sat down. My brother stared at me as though seeing me for the first time. He was angry but he was puzzled too.

"I was always Dad's boy," he said, "we did everything together. Built flatties, fished, watered the garden when I was too small to help with anything else, and then I grew strong and capable with my hands. I helped him every way. We were very close. I was his favorite. You knew that, didn't you? I often wondered if you resented it but if you did you never showed it. We were very close all right. The day I capsized the flattie and clung, all morning, to the piles of the bridge, confident that he'd miss the flattie, even if he didn't miss me, and that he would find and rescue me, even though I had been told never to touch the flattie, I knew he'd find

and rescue me. Gosh it was cold, waiting. Then, the days we spent, just waiting for bites, not saying a word, just happy to be together . . .” I listened dumbly.

“ . . . He was at work when it happened. He just dropped where he stood and they took him away in an ambulance. He worked until he dropped. There was no chance from the beginning. They just opened him up, looked, and sewed him up again. I should have noticed. By God, I should have noticed. You were away and you couldn’t be expected to know, but, God in Heaven, I was here and he was right beside me. It wasn’t until he was gone that I remembered the things I should have noticed: the hollows at the temples, the loss of weight, the deepening lines — not that he ever complained. He was very brave. But his smile just seemed a little faded . . .”

In the silence I saw my father between us. Little now, and frail, his hair white and not curly any more, his broken nose, his eyes faded and rheumy from too much beer, the gay alertness all gone now. The sand running out now.

My brother looked at me carefully. “Not a chance from the beginning. They let us visit him when he wished. That was intended to be kind. He had something leading into his wrist, and something else in his nose. He tired very easily. I wonder what kept him alive.

“And always, when we came, he looked above and behind me. Above my shoulder. You’re taller than me and you’d have showed up beyond me, if you’d been there. He didn’t say much but his eyes asked for you. We told him we didn’t have your address, but any day now, any day now. I used to sit and watch him and think of the time when we nursed our mother. Remember? How alive her eyes were! But the

light was fading out of Dad's. He was an old man who knew it was time to go. But he hung on, long after he should have been dead, waiting for you.

"We were very close, Dad and I. I was his favorite. Yet, at the end it was you he wanted. Oh, well . . ."

The brother I was just getting to know walked to the door and stood, irresolute, with his hand on the knob. He is printed in my memory. He was clearly debating whether to say something further. ". . . you bloody snob, you despised him; you and your bloody education — you aren't fit to lick his boots. Who set you on the path, eh? And me: I went to work to keep the family so that you could study. Me. And I might have been as bright as you. And you'd come home and things would revolve round you, and you'd try your cheap irony on us. And Dad said not to mind because it was part of growing up, but, Christ, I did mind, and I was strong enough to murder you, if I could get my hands on you, and you were always so cunning at slipping away and I was seldom quick enough, and I could never goad you. We never had a row unless you had some sort of drop on me. He was my father as well as yours . . ."

My brother went into the kitchen and began, absent-mindedly, to set about making me a cup of tea.

My mother wanted to talk too. She told me about the sedate miracle of her courtship. "He courted me for over ten years. That was a long time even in those days. Everyone warned me against him, but I wouldn't listen, or if I did I didn't hear. He was a lot older than me, and, when we were married, he faked the age he gave the minister." Mother giggled a little nervously at the enormity of it all. "I didn't know he drank all his money and that we couldn't get married

until I had saved enough. But that ten years and more passed like a day.

"We were so much in love. Your father always treated me with the greatest respect. Anyway, we were married and we left the city to make our fortunes in this little town. We never left it. Your father was always anxious to visit his parents and his brothers but he would not return to the city unless he could do it in style — make a splash. He just had to impress people. Of course, he drank everything and so he gambled in shillings on very long chances in the hope of a very big win and a triumphant return to the city. It never came."

I mumbled something about it being a shame how he had ruined her life. I supposed that that was what she wanted me to say. But she stared at me with indignation and amazement.

"Your father was a wonderful man. I have been a very lucky woman. I don't know what I can tell you to prove it to you. Drink apart, there was nothing in him that wasn't good. He was honorable, patient, kind, and very brave. I wish I could make you see — wait a minute though — you know he did all the housework for me after your sister was born, you know that; the cleaning, the washing, the cooking at the weekends."

I nodded, thinking of what my brother and I had done at the same time realizing that it hadn't been of the magnitude that two small boys had imagined. But she was not done. ". . . and there was one other thing . . . (she hesitated a long time, struggling with her sense of propriety, and then, suddenly, made up her mind and took the plunge) . . . when your sister was born I had a very bad time. I nearly died.

And another child would certainly have killed me. So your father went to see a doctor. But all the doctors in town were very good men . . . very religious, and they wouldn't tell him anything. Your father was very upset. So he moved into the boys' room and slept there for the rest of his life. You must remember it. You wouldn't understand what that meant to a man like your father. It must have been terrible for him. Terrible. It's not so bad for a woman, but, oh, your poor, poor father. Now do you see the kind of man your father was?

"I visited him every day in hospital. It used to take me a long time to get there because there is no bus from where we are. My legs, you know. He used to smile at me and call me the names we used when we were courting. Sometimes we'd sit for a long time without speaking. I wasn't a child when I met him. And that was over forty years ago. We'd been together for a long time, and when we meet again I'll be more patient with his weakness and be more grateful for the rest. He used to look up so eagerly when we came. He did so look forward to seeing me and the children, and, in spite of all my cruelty to him, he wanted me more even than the children." Mother shook her head over the wonder of it. "Mind you, all I did was for the sake of the children, but I see now how cruel I was. There was one thing, though; the way he sort of counted us, hoping for you. He wasn't able to move his head so he stayed in the one position to see the door. Of course he knew you'd have something very important on, but he was disappointed all the same. The last time . . ."

She looked down at her hands. We all have that trick from her. Or is it that I just noticed it in everybody? The one relic of her beauty as a young girl, her lovely hands, the almond nails and the slim fingers. She cried softly to herself.

“ . . . the last time, he very gently let my hand drop and smiled . . . how *could* he smile at me! Smiled so sweetly, and he said, ‘I’ll go to sleep now. Wake me when my son comes.’ We tiptoed out. An hour later the neighbors came in to say the hospital wanted to speak to me.”

Sound trumpets on the other side! Sound trumpets for my father. And wake him when his son comes!

18

LONDON is a poor place to spend a leave. Compared with, say, Chicago, it isn’t half so crudely alive. Or perhaps it was, once, before the war. Or again, it could be that we just didn’t know where to look. Have it your own way. Yet London has its points. How’s that for presumption?

The most interesting thing about the city is the changes in the habits of the people as a result of the war. All right, all right, I know nothing at first hand about their prewar habits, but I’ve read plenty and been told more. Especially, from opposite sides, by Geoff and Alec. But at the time I’m talking about I was in London for the first time. In the middle of an Alert. They call the alarms “alerts” now; it doesn’t sound so panicky. Fancy picking the middle of an Alert to begin to get to know London! On second thoughts, if a city *is* its people, what better time?

Pip and I nipped into one of the sections of the Tube which had been closed to make a refuge. Nothing short of a bomb

plunging down the escalator could do any damage and even at that there are twists and turns to be negotiated which make it most unlikely.

In consequence everyone feels very safe and tries to set up a life similar to the former one. There are even permanent residents and pathetic attempts at making the place home-like. Women and children predominate. The women are washed-out, worn-out slum mothers; the children are perky with the chirpiness of rather undernourished sparrows. Their pale narrow faces and their general air of the gutter revolted me. Not so Pip. He was immediately on the friendliest terms with everyone and indescribably filthy clawlike hands were pawing over his uniform. I don't know how he stood it. I'm told that rationing and feeding in school means the youngsters are better nourished than ever in peacetime. I hope so, but there's a long way to go.

The air was heavy with the sour smell of an overcrowded sleeping place and over it all hung, almost visibly, the stench of unwashed humanity permanently sealed in its unwashed clothes, and of lice-infested hair.

The really amazing thing, though, was the way the women went about their accustomed motions of putting children to bed for the night. A quarrel or two flared up and died down listlessly. "What's the use?"

A couple of pros, still in their teens, made a tentative pass at us. To my surprise Pip encouraged them. They were desperately thin and we both like a little flesh on our women. Their tawdry finery merely indicated how little there was in the trade. Or how poorly they plied it.

Pip made all the arrangements while I wondered what the hell was biting him and we went to a pub in the neighbor-

hood as soon as it was safe. We had a drink or two and some food and then they retired to powder their noses. I tackled Pip at once. Gosh, did he really think I was interested in whatever they chose to powder? He mumbled something about the "poor bitches need the money and they'd be sore if we just gave it to them." Fancy Pip seeing so far into the feminine mind. He actually knew what constituted an insult to a prostitute, even a 'prentice one. Not that that was any help.

"For God's sake," said I, "don't you know, you dim-wit, that everyone is directed to employment. These girls are probably earning more than they've ever had in their lives before. They certainly don't need the money. How the hell do you propose to get us out of this?" Pip looked at me in a most trusting way. "I'd made sure you'd work that one out. And if they don't need the money, what the devil are they in the game for? Oh, well, I suppose men are a bit short."

What a mess! I nipped along to an office phone and made hurried arrangements with the only friend of ours I could lay my hands upon. He agreed to ring back in five minutes. Pip explained I was just notifying the station where we were.

The ring came through. I did the lying. Pip did the corroborating. We did a little hurried lovemaking as a sop to their pride and then I discovered that mine wasn't even good at her game and was desperately frightened. I asked her the obvious question. Apparently Pip had been luckier. Mine wanted a man but she didn't want disease. And she did want babies to go with the man (singular). My Luck! Perhaps it was, too.

To close off the matter as neatly as possible, we asked them

to see us off at the station. Or rather, I asked. Pip just looked startled. Serve the dumb cluck right. I let him stew all the way to the station and paid no attention to his frantic mumbles about somebody would see us and . . . mumble, mumble. The girls were absurdly flattered and I exerted myself quite a bit during the drive. Let Pip sweat!

However, when we got to the station I pointed out to them that they'd never get another taxi to take them back so we paid the driver for the return trip. Their thrifty souls just would not permit them to come farther when the taxi was actually paid for. Pip's sigh of relief was probably heard in New Zealand.

On the platform he grunted "Got any sisters?" "No," said I, lying stoutly. "Neither have I, thank God," said he.

19

BILL was on a training station not far from us. You'd have liked Bill. Drunk or sober, he was a most entertaining chap. I believe he'd been in the R.A.F. aerobatic teams in those prewar aviation shows. You know the idea — aircraft connected by ribbons take off, loop, etc., all in perfect unison. It's harder than it looks. And Bill was a dab at it. He could make an aircraft sit up and beg. Everything went well with him. He had that touch that some people have with horses. Whatever it was, he had it. I never saw him fly but his name was legend.

When I knew him he was sitting on his bum as a Link

Trainer Instructor. Think of that. L.T.I. for a man like him.

It was the grog that did it. He just couldn't leave it alone. I never saw him in the mess without a noggin in his hand. He was short, dark, thin and handsome — the very beau ideal of a pilot — and his voice was the pleasantest I've heard; there was always a little laugh in it. Even when he was indignant about his treatment he spoke always with a wry laugh in his voice. It gave his remarks a cynical air which I doubted if he intended.

He was incapable of sustained anything. He was the most charming weakling that ever lived. And what a way he had with women!

I used to nip about the countryside a bit whenever I could scrounge a ride. He used to do the same. So frequently, we were competitors for the one remaining seat. Isn't it ironic that the finest pilot of England should be ferried about by people who were in every aerial way his inferiors? But you could trust Bill as far as you can kick a grand piano. He wouldn't willingly do anyone any harm, but he just couldn't help involving others in his misfortunes — especially women. He didn't mean a thing, but they would insist that he did.

Occasionally there'd be more than one vacant seat and we'd get off together. I'll never forget one time.

The very young pilot had heard vaguely of Bill and inquired politely if he'd "like a go." Bill gave the controls such a hungry look as to startle me mightily; just for a moment what makes a super pilot showed through: the lover and the loved one.

He inched into the seat. And I'll swear she felt the differ-

ence. I know we did. Even when he spent the first few moments familiarizing himself with the feel of the aircraft, he did it with such an air. Authority in every sweeping curve, yet concealed by a superb flair. Almost casually he beat up a certain house in a way you'd not believe, then pulled off the tightest turn I've ever been in because he wanted "to see if she'd come out to look." She came out all right. I nearly did the same. Once he'd secured the audience he wanted: oh Lord! Once we were upside-down in a quarry! True Rock overhead and all around and the only glimpse of blue sky squarely under the feet so to speak. We went looking for specimens of foliage in half the local copses.

It was a very shaken young pilot who sat us down at our destination. As he mumbled to me as we shambled off the tarmac: "If he's a bloody pilot what the hell am I?" What, indeed?

20

ALL the current hoo-ha about new explosives and bombs should interest you. Blockbusters and the like sound well but they don't really represent a new departure. No matter how heavy the bomb, no matter how refined its manufacture, the fact remains that it is simply a device to turn a solid into a gas with the greatest possible increase of volume. What we need is a new approach to destructiveness.

Do you remember our discussion about war in general? You said war was policy. Nothing more. You advanced the

theory that all wars were decided in advance by a simple comparison of industrial capacity. Andy raised inventive capacity, and then, himself, tied it to industrial development. I put up the idea of an ultimate weapon. Remember? And you asked me to what end. I think we agreed that the ultimate weapon was the one which would enable us to demand, in perfect safety, whatever we would of the enemy, without loss to ourselves; and he in no position to refuse.

Do you remember it all grew out of Andy's star recognition and the recognition of stars by color. We got round to stellar temperatures and how they were maintained. Remember that one too? And Andy said that the ultimate blackmail would be for someone to threaten to turn the earth into a small and insignificant star. To bring the cosmic experiment (man) to mere pointlessness. Fantastic, of course. Probably absurd as well. But, at the time, I wouldn't see where the argument was absurd. What worries me is that I can't see it now either. If I am to go, I'm most anxious that something should survive me.

An earth-destroying bomb means one world forthwith. Unless both sides hit on it at the same time. Is that possible, do you think? Scientific discoveries are in the air.

Andy wanted to argue each point, step by step. Then he dropped it like a shot because you were convincing him and he didn't want to be convinced. Not that he didn't want a world state. We all do. It's just that he couldn't stomach how it all was to come about. I told you before that Andy was a man with a mission.

Queer what brings men to war. Individual men, I mean. Andy is centuries out of time. He honestly and genuinely believes, in spite of all the evidence, that this war is a war to

end wars. When I, aping you, tell him cynically that that is very possible, he isn't thrown the least off balance. He admits, as he must, that the war-to-end-all-wars stuff was used by greasy politicians in the past. And in the present, too. But he thinks it's different this time. Like a fool, I asked why it should be. And Andy showed me why, and I got his point. Wouldn't I like to live to see the greasy bunch at Westminster dazedly discover that what they had so loudly been trumpeting as truth was in fact that very commodity.

Can Negroes, in Africa as well as America, ever be the same postwar? Say around 1949, if this is to be another Ten Years' War. Can Britain? And what will happen to France overseas, now that the French have relied so much on native troops?

What chaos we'll have in devastated, fought-over, liberated Europe. All the old landmarks gone. In essence, I suppose we are fighting this war to divide up Germany into several pieces so that she will not menace the rest in our lifetimes. But will the victors stick together until this is accomplished? I am supposing that our side is to be the victor.

And then there is Asia. Japan doesn't really matter. The Chinese will absorb Japan as they have absorbed much more formidable folk in the past. And what of the Colonies? "I doubt," said Andy, "if a sahib will be more than a philological curiosity after the war."

Where were we? Oh, why individual men go to war. I once asked Pip why he was in it. "Why not?" he answered. And that is an answer too. Anyone could see he found immense satisfactions in Air Force life. Comrades; opportunities; the chance to show his mettle.

Geoff came in from conviction. Who strikes at Britain strikes at Geoff and all like him. He, the most complicated of us, came in for the simplest motives. Don tells me that when one's friends are about to join up one's own thoughts turn in the same direction. Simple, isn't it?

Everyone has his own beliefs as to what we're fighting about. And that's not necessarily the same as what we're fighting for. We all see our postwar worlds differently. Yet, oddly enough, everyone sees this or that most remarkably changed, but his own little island of interests is unchanged in the midst of a sea of change. A jungle of change, rather.

I wonder why I joined the Air Force.

21

"BRIEFING room," said Pip. "All of youse."

We all grinned at him and drifted along. Everyone grinned at Pip. His square head with its jug-handle ears and bashed-in nose, the firm thud of his oversize shoes, all these were a delight to the uncritical eye. In Civvy Street he had been a wharfie. "Stevedore," said someone. "Christ, no!" said Pip. "Stevedore: like hell! Stevedores tell us when we work." Now, how on earth did Pip get here, so early in the piece?

He had been commissioned with manifest reluctance on the part of the powers that be, but how had he got in at all? Apparently, once in, there must have been trouble about the publicity siphoned off from the glamour boys up the way and so commissioned he was. And he was a great success. Air

crews and ground crews alike. You see, he spoke both their languages, and a sort of digest of technicalities, Air Force slang and plain bad language. And the beautiful thing about it was that he was completely unaware that it was not a merely normal form of address.

In action he was the coolest, most calculating estimator of risks and possibilities. He was an excellent judge of impossibilities and never attempted them, on the basis that he, the crew and the aircraft all had values to themselves and the Air Force, intact. His "bloody hero" was the most scathing condemnation he knew. He admired nothing so much as competence, for each man in his field. The mere sight of his own competent, square, work-ingrained dirty hands about his patter was confidence-inspiring.

He had his pick, I'd think, of all the navigators in the pool and he chose me. Once I asked him why.

"Passed out top of the course, didn't yuh? Well, for navigator ju-ju yuh gotter have brains, see. Lots of brains. Bloody brains for what the others don't think about. And yuh got them."

"What about other qualities?" I asked.

"Brains'll do," he replied. And with that the topic closed.

I'll give up trying to indicate his speech phonetically and, in any case, Don thinks it phony.

Pip never questioned anything I did; never seemed to consider it necessary. And he never showed the faintest desire to learn anything of what I was about. Perhaps he wisely resolved to leave the theory to those who had to like it. The result was that I slaved for him the way I did for you. We've been in shaky do's together. We've been most places together and I know him. There is such a thing as friendship be-

tween men. He had the most extraordinary sense of humor, or rather, the broadest sense of fun. I never tried anything but the broadest jokes on him. And how he enjoyed them! I enjoyed his enjoying them.

From all this you might think of him as a sort of Caliban. Nothing of the kind. Within the limits of his actual experience he was the most intelligent person I've ever known and quite the most forceful and lovable. There'll never be another like Pip, will there, Don? His like comes once in a century and lucky folk warm their lives momentarily in his passing.

All I'm saying was pre-Marian.

Marian. Marian! She was so gorgeously turned out one might imagine her lacquered. Isn't a lacquered surface something hard and shiny used as a finish over a quite different material?

I have never seen Marian at a loss. The only time I can imagine her at a loss, I wasn't there to see. In her way she was as competent as Pip in his, but how different the field of competence.

Her sleek perfection began at her shoes. Who was it said that it's possible to tell a woman by her shoes? Lovely shoes she wore. And she had the loveliest legs. And a body calculated to awaken the carnal desires of a wooden Indian we saw outside a tobacconist's shop in Chicago. Her hair, dear God, as near perfect as to deter — oh well, deter. I'd like to go over Marian, feature by feature, and not too literally either, but I'm damned if I see why I should pander to your slaver-ing. Maybe you think you could handle her and maybe you're right, but the encounter wouldn't be all one-sided, my observant friend.

Now what has all this to do with my Pip? The fact of the matter was she was going to marry him! Bloody well true! Now, why the hell should she bother? The war is the chance for such as Marian and the sea is full of good fish. Poor fish! Why Pip?

Besides, I found later she had, at this time, made up her mind "to make something of him." She recognized the force of him. The war was the chance for Pip, too. She saw there was a sort of power in him which had been waiting for just this opportunity, slowly maturing against the time of need. Pip was destined for greatness, if he lived. Not for him the promotions by survival which will ensure an odd crop of postwar senior officers. Pip blazed!

Marian saw all this, and perhaps more besides, but she didn't see, as we did, that her grooming would destroy the essential man, and when she "had made something of him" there would be nothing left. The bawdiness — and it was all of that! — virility, courage, shrewdness, cyclonic energy, foul language, contempt for manners, tactless and fundamental honesty, simple directness of soul — all that *was* Pip. We hated her.

Of course, we didn't know more than a part of this at the time. It leaked out, a little at the time through the sprung staves, so to speak. Pip was so overcome by the wonder of it all that it was possible to piece things together.

All this went through my mind as I looked at him, looked at his back as I drifted along to briefing behind him. I wondered what to do about it.

Briefing was a much more thorough job than usual. Not that it isn't fairly well done at all times, but today, however, everyone knew something big was brewing. The station-

master opened the proceedings with a "lead up" to Paris. He put across the usual line about the care of historical monuments, not hurting the feelings of the Free French and so on and so on. No one listened to the silly old bastard after he said Paris. The real information came later and it was "the Renault Works," which didn't mean a thing to us as we'd never seen them. We knew they were large and that about a couple of hundred bombers would be necessary to do them in. If the idea really was to do them in.

Don't believe all the nonsense you doubtless read about bomb damage. It is not nearly as great as the propaganda boys imagine, nor is precision bombing anything other than a statement of pious intent. In target areas, unload and get out! Get out, and thank God for the let out.

The fornicator took us to the dispersal point and we did the necessary. Then, wonder of wonders, up pops the station-master for a final blather. "Wish I were coming with you boys," etc. and etc. "It must be a piece of cake!" said we. So it was. So it was.

A lovely evening over Paris. A lovely evening for Paris. The second dicky had been there before on his own private business so he took us on a personally conducted tour before the important public business of the evening. Dead on E.T.A. we were on the job.

I personally released two 2000-pounders and felt the familiar upsurge as they left. And nothing happened!

I was never so disappointed in my life. But suddenly, the roofs below stared upward at me and I'd have sworn that pieces pattered on the aircraft and that an enormous breath of air went sighing past us like the sound of a far-off mighty wind. Of course, we didn't hear a thing and nothing like this

really happened but that's how it looked as though it sounded.

There was no interference so we went on another tour. We could have played Ring o' Roses round the Eiffel Tower for all of Occupied Europe to see. And, all the time, one small-caliber ack-ack gun piddling up at us: the sole air defense of Paris. What a piece of cake. If the station-master had been with us he'd have got a bar to his gong even more cheaply than he collected the original. It was so easy it's surprising there weren't more senior officers in on it. Our Intelligence must have been seriously at fault or the atmosphere would have been stiff with braid.

"All our aircraft returned safely."

And so to bed, nicely filled out with sausage and mash. And will you please tell me why I went to bed with Marian on my mind?

Next day we read all about it in the newspapers. The political aspects were well thrashed out and the radio performed miracles of what the Americans call "doubletalk." But, rebuild the works as they may, the Jerries can't replace the hundreds of skilled French workmen we killed and *that* was the purpose of the raid.

Let the Free French meditate on that one.

Personally, I'll meditate on Marian.

Marian! Marian! Or, rather, Pip!

In the end we held a meeting to discuss the salvation of Pip. All right, all right, I'll admit it was none of our business and, I suppose, we'd never have had the hide to butt in if we were still in Civvy Street. What a meeting!

I called it but was, as usual, too unpopular to be voted to the chair. The whole show resolved itself into a committee

of ways and means. Ways to circumvent Marian and means for the guy who was to do it. Everyone agreed that Pip had to be shown Marian in her true light. Not that we knew, we merely guessed; and I often wonder, these days, how right we were and how much a louse I was. Later, of course, I got to know Marian very well indeed. And I honestly think she *was* lacquered.

Once the meeting got its mind made up, decided on ways and raised a bit of cash, the question occurred to me: "Who?" The meeting gave me a pitying look and the chairman thanked me in most unsuitable terms. So I was it!

Marian lived in town, in one of those quaint old-world adapted mews. Marian lived damnably uncomfortably in someone's abandoned coach house, at a most fashionable address. "Arty," perhaps, rather than fashionable. The correct adjective, I discovered, was either "charming" or "divine," depending on the kind of woman you were; the one with the long pants or the one with the short. People of striking originality called it "unusual." How was it really so? Very dashing blades, however, had yet other adjectives.

All the visitors were civvies. Shrewd little bitch, Marian. A girl must live, but Pip had no existence apart from the Air Force, so she ran no risk at all.

Behold me, then, in civvies too. I'd always wanted to wear full evening dress but I've never owned anything better than a dinner suit. When I ordered the trimmings, the mess told me somewhat sourly to hire the goods. I pointed out that no gentlemen ever wore hired tails. They asked me to stick to talking about myself and added, as riders, a few really good, if lewd, jokes about hired tails. Luckily, I'm a standard "tall thin" model.

The big problem was to make the necessary accidental acquaintance. We selected a victim, a fellow who knew Marian, a civvy naturally. We found one of his acquaintances and then one of *his*, and finally found someone in a nearby mess who knew the last. See the chain? I was passed by easy stages from one to the other and so on. Eventually, I padded round to the little mews with some blokes we met at a buck theater party. Incidentally, this was my first meeting with the expense account.

I don't mind admitting I was more than a little dicky and muffed my first approach. However, she thought me shy and took it as an enormous compliment to herself and was very sweet to me. Noticing how the land lay, I laid it on a little in a most ingenuous way — I was younger than the rest. Apparently no one wondered how a mere youngster could foot it in that company. Just as well. The game was going to be tougher than I thought.

Still, I *was* younger than the rest. Even if I didn't have an expense account. Perhaps a lady could keep me as a pet? No? As a matter of fact she couldn't resist the temptation to "make something of" me too. And did that work?

Now, let's take stock a bit. What are we trying to do? The only thing that will shift Pip will be sexual infidelity.

Now, while I'm regarded as a shy ingenuous person who somehow dances very well, but who, regrettably, doesn't have any money, my chances are nil. Who wants to sleep with Marian has to have the goods if he hasn't the money. She has to be made to want to, which means I have to get some sort of ascendancy over her. But how?

Actually, I grew a little less naïve each time we met and Marian loved it. She could see something for her work. It must have been rather discouraging with Pip sometimes.

And all this time I laid off the warm and willing flesh elsewhere and mortified my hormones in the interests of the ultimate showdown.

Bit by bit, and ever so gently, I began to check the rein on her. The thread by which I held her was so tenuous I had to be bloody careful. Gently, brother. I hunted up places to take her, then forced her to change *her* plans to come with *me*. And the places were invariably very good. I used to describe them to the mess as a partial return on their investment since none could see for themselves. Someone might be recognized.

All this time I was getting to know Marian. She stood so well. Her hair caught the light so. The only effect liquor had on her was to make her eyes sparkle in a most attractive way. That was because she never drank very much if there were more than two present. In her own field she was superb. I wonder what the Americans call girls of this kind? They usually have picturesque euphemisms for the pleasures of the flesh. I tried to worm out of her how she came to meet Pip but the line grew too hot and I just averted a major disaster. But I did hear a lot of Marian when young. It weakened my resolution quite a bit. The war was her chance too. Her chance to clean up while her beauty lasted. And she *was* beautiful. Not pretty — beautiful.

At first she gave me her official line, but later, the first really undeniable sign of progress, was her confiding in me. She was very determined to clean up, financially, and then set up someone really capable in a line she had in mind. He hadn't any money either but, in time, she'd have enough.

I heard less and less of the mysterious person who was to be set up with Marian's money and she even neglected gilt-edged opportunities on occasion. She frequently wanted

me to be a little "outrageous" with her. She liked, as our acquaintance grew more intimate, me to "take liberties" as the dear Queen would say. Believe me? I'm not quite sure that I do. It was rather pathetic when she came out from behind the lacquer. We went places where she didn't have to worry about the perfection of her grooming. She even found some old clothes. She lost interest in the exotic sex that had shaken me more than a little and grew keen on just plain lovemaking — anywhere. We had a lot of fun at the foot of sundry trees, and she didn't give a hoot about the possibility of being seen. Oh, Marian!

And so Marian told Pip as much as was good for him. She broke it very delicately to him, to give the devil her due and then she met the other fellow to make some arrangements which were, by now, urgently necessary.

Or, rather, she *was* to have met him.

22

I REMEMBER very well my first shaky do. The homing pigeon did actually lay an egg, not that I blame the bird. I'd like to have done the same myself. The air was so thick with missiles we breathed great gulps of air in the gaps between them. I remember your saying that, in theory, ack-ack can be watched coming up, so that it can be seen heading for the old girl and then drifting slowly astern. It's true. But you didn't mention the great greasy lumps in the sky, the frantic weaving so fatal to the navigation of a novice, or the night fighters, or the damnable feeling of emptiness.

And the flares and roman candles and searchlights are oddly beautiful. Sometimes, they have up to fifty lights in one cone and some poor devil gets caught and one can see the long, obscene fingers gathering around him. An aircraft, caught this way, looks rather like a bemused moth, a beautiful silver moth. And then, there's just a red glow. No one ever seems to get out of the cone. One has a rather horrifying feeling of relief when the lights pick up someone. They're bound to find someone, one feels, and the sooner they catch someone else the better. Of course it's not a reasonable feeling, but then in these circumstances we're not reasonable people.

Homeward bound and don't spare the horses, James. But where the hell are we? Set a course! Must set a course! The trouble is what course? Weakly I curse the powers that be. Why send a fellow on a do like this on his very first one? Second thoughts: this isn't my first do, but it is the first shaky one.

Scared to death, eh? And forgotten all you ever knew? What course? Not a star, not a break in the cloud, no, not one, not even as big as a man's hand.

Why didn't I notice the total cloud as we came over?

Two breaks at an interval of a few minutes. The ruddy glow of Arcturus drooping low towards the horizon. Bless Arcturus and bless the bloke that taught me to recognize it, sight unseen. And triple blessings on the same head as I run up the true track and the true ground speed in the manner he taught me. Two position lines mean that we're as good as home. Everyone in the aircraft knows the navigator has two position lines and that the new boy has made good. This time anyway. Everyone is happy. The gunners are think-

ing of food. We all think of food. The pilots think of women. All pilots think of women before food, if not before meals. Guess who's in Pip's mind. I think of E.T.A. No one thinks now of the possible days in the dinghy. No one thought of much else till I got those position lines.

One circuit before touchdown and a gorgeous gray dawn following us round the sky. Food and bed in prospect.

Only one wheel goes down. Who cares? Lift it back and down we go on our belly and slither to a stop. I clamber out stiffly with a hand from Pip. We look towards the nose where Don shoves up a thumb to us and down to the tail for Alec. The truck picks us up almost as soon as the crash wagon arrives.

Then it's food and bed just as soon as the I.O. lets up with his patter.

I lie awake for a little while. Oh, yes, I was scared all right. But my first shaky do is over and already I've started to build myself up in my own mind. I tell myself that I came out of my first shaky do with a certain panache — if I have the word correctly.

I carefully shut out of my mind the situation if the cloud had not broken, and I carefully don't inquire of myself how many times I can expect that stroke of luck. All I say to myself is: isn't it lucky to have your luck first time off?

23

Do you remember the kid's song "London Town Is Burning Down"? I've seen it happen. And I don't even know how to

begin to tell you about it. It's true I didn't see the worst — or, at least, so I am told. What I saw was bad enough.

One feels one ought to do something, that a mere bystander is really as much a nuisance as the firefighters say; yet, what to do? Actually there's so little one can do, and the helplessness is the worst feeling.

Little narrow streets aflame from end to end, blocked with rubble, crisscrossed by firemen's hoses; thin shrieks sound so unimportant beside the roar of the fire and the thunder of the water, yet they probably indicate that some poor devil is being burned alive. Hear me! For Christ's sake, hear me! Someone being burned alive! Do something if it's the last thing you ever do.

I hate to think of anyone pinned down in the path of the fire.

Can you hear me? Pinned down in the path of the fire, I say. Don't let's think any further of that! You were in the Napier earthquake. Try to imagine Auckland like that. It won't give you much idea of even a minor blitz, but it'll help.

Bombed people are numbed unless actually injured. They don't cry out or have hysterics but they do revert to the most primitive of all instincts and aimlessly huddle together. Only the animal instinct left.

The discipline of the firemen carries them through. They're a great bunch. Their frantic efficiency contrasts oddly with the stupidity of the victims of the "incident." Isn't that a lovely word? The bombed folk know it's no "incident." Does the fat boy really think that calling bombing by another name actually alters it? He's such a windy spouter of words that he may think they do alter things.

Yes, bombed folk say, and mean "bombed." They know war's war. It's to be expected, now that the civvies are the front line, that they'll catch it — apart from those in bomb-proof underground towns of course. Meaning the politicians.

A man is safer in the Air Force than in London. Statistics prove it.

Pip and I watched. Clumsily we try to help but our lack of training is a hindrance. Little acts of heroism occur all around us, and, of course, the inevitable bathos as well. One old lady looked at a house where the side had been torn out and then said with obvious satisfaction, "I always knew the Robinsons didn't have a sideboard."

Actually the material damage is dwarfed by the human wreckage. A fragment of a woman is a horrifying and sickening sight. Intestinal and head wounds are very common but less so than broken limbs. The latter are so normal-looking that Pip and I look at them for relief from pity and fear. Was it Aristotle who said that tragedy, by pity and terror, purged the emotions? It does. On recollection later. At the time, one is as numbed as the poor wretched beings dug out of the remains of their homes.

It's always the working class that gets it worst; not that the uninjured are unduly worried. Their lives are so near the subsistence level that a little worsening is scarcely noticed. They double up a little more and share with a cheerful improvidence.

Fire is the real terror. A broken gas main, a shower of incendiaries, an overturned stove, and panic begins: Fire! Fire! Even those dazed by blast show signs of fear at the mention of fire. And Christ alone knows what would happen in New Zealand. We'd all bloody well panic too. Yet one won-

ders what there is to burn in some of the English homes, they're so poverty-stricken.

As I lie here, in retrospect, I can see clearly those hellish nights, but at the time I saw things and nothing registered. I was numbed, too. It was like turning over the pages of a book of horrors and having fleeting glimpses of each thing more terrifying than the last until there's only a vast confusion of terror. Later, my memory would toss up vivid little pictures. There was a living child with half a face; a terrified pet dog; fireman cursing as a leaky lead shot water all over him; a warden primly taking notes before the dust of the debris had settled; a whistling bomb with its devil's shriek; the vague shafts of the searchlights. And, over all, the stench and the roar of the fire.

You may ask what the hell I am doing here. I'm with Pip. He wants to see for himself.

I'm afraid. Afraid of being killed. But afraid, most of all, of what I may see.

We saw plenty. What is courage anyway? The chap who doesn't know what fear is isn't brave: merely insensitive.

Next morning the fight is still on, the peril to London is even greater, the pall of smoke denser, but somehow everything is less terrifying. We can see the damage more clearly. It is indescribably bad, but it's not as bad as it had felt at night, when we guessed at unmentionable horrors. Perhaps the real terror is the night. Man has always feared what the night may hold. A vast fire doesn't turn night into day. It merely makes the night more evil.

Yet when it was scorching our faces Pip turned to me and said very quietly, "I suppose Hamburg is something like this." Neither of us spoke again for a long time.

When I think of that night I wonder what I really look like now. Why won't they give me a mirror? They laugh and say, "How would you hold it with your hands all covered in dressings? *We* don't need a mirror to do your hair." I wonder if I have any left? They take a long time dressing my head. Or do I just think so because I have so much trouble in understanding what is said?

Oh, Lord, I'm tired today. Tired to death. And the fire won't keep out of my mind. Shall I tell you what hellfire feels like? Sometimes a burn feels like an unbearably cold thin steel edge on one's skin. Do you remember the cold chill as the skin is cut? You must have cut yourself shaving.

That's how I feel all over. Insofar as I am permitted to feel anything. Sometimes it's the thin cold edge, other times it's different. Always it's damnable. Always.

24

So they got Andy. Ginger hair, grin, freckles, and all. When I saw he had gone, I suddenly realized how close we'd been.

It seems yesterday that I was waiting outside your door and I noticed another bloke waiting there too. On the strength of my one week's acquaintance with you, altruism impelled me to give the green hand a word or two of advice. I turned my thumbs down. He nodded. I nodded. "What station?" He told me. So he had almost got to A.T.S. too. The axe falls hardest when it falls just as you're about to get your wings. "What goes?" he asked. "We do," I said, "Can-

ada or the U.K." I wasn't really at all sure myself but I had to impress the ginger guy. I doubt, though, if I noticed much about him. I was too full of pictures of myself as a navigator.

In the work which followed I wondered, with a blazing contempt to which I am much too prone, how the rest could be such dumb clucks as not to get what you were teaching them. That is, all except the ginger bloke. We gravitated together. Partly because we hated the rest, partly because we were natural rivals and wanted to watch each other. We were rivals from the start. Sometimes we competed so strongly for standing with you that we nearly became enemies. In the dorm we slept in adjoining beds. On leave nights we beat up the town together: women-hunting mostly. I used to go for the intense kind, their unstable emotions saved me a lot of spadework. Andy's meat was the lively kind: they liked his ginger hair, freckles, and grin. I don't blame them — I found them pleasant too.

Then you called us both into your office and outlined the situation about Canada. Do you remember? You said, "I'm not going to have you pair of crooks fighting each other for 'top of Canada' and thus raising the standard on the other poor bastards who come in later courses. It's much better that *both* of you should top the navigators in Canada in turn." Did you really feel so confident about us? We looked at each other. This was real. Then you fished a coin from your pocket and tossed and I won. So I was a course ahead of Andy in Canada. Were you so sure we'd actually get to Canada? The Empire Scheme hadn't really started and everything was very makeshift when we arrived. How did you know that we'd actually get there?

Andy and I weren't really friends. We were much too egotistical for that, but we had a mutual respect, one for the other. Sometimes, especially when examinations were in the air, the tension between us came to the surface. Each of us was intensely jealous of the other's standing with you and we spent a lot of time endeavoring to evaluate where we stood.

As I told you, when we were in Canada we beat up one or two places in the U.S. when leave came our way. It was easier when nothing was really organized. To my annoyance, I found that Andy's personal charm — Lord, if he could only hear me say that! — was much more popular than my social gifts. He made friends readily there. In fact he did so all his life. He had a genius for friendship. He and his friends stuck together in a way that made me frankly envious. It must be wonderful never to feel completely alone. Yet I had my share of his friendship for the taking and I didn't realize it until too late. Andy was proof against loneliness. He wouldn't lie here like me and wear his loneliness and his fear on his sleeve. Oh no. Not Andy.

When he first came to see me in England and told me he was on the "lunatic run" I was amazed at first; then, when I thought it over, hardly even surprised. My word, Andy was interesting.

"The various underground organizations in Europe need all sorts of things and somehow they have to get them. Quite frequently, and this will amaze Hitler, leaders have to be popped in or out. That's where we come in. Whatever goes there simply can't be dropped by parachute because one chute discovered means that the whole shooting box is discovered too. And the grisly word to remember is 'reprisals.' Therefore we deliver everything personally by air or sea.

That means night work. Little ships dash out of English ports and creep into secluded bays on the coast of Europe. This is no secret to our friend the enemy. He knows, too, that we have an 'air express' to inland parts. As the airdromes are always different, the places of contact in Europe are always different too: and with the time set only a few hours in advance, his information isn't much use to him — *provided all secrets are kept.*" Thus Andy.

"The old Lysanders we used in the early jobs," he told me, "were unsuitable for the job, to put it mildly. Shaky do's are the rule rather than the exception. We take off from England with explosives or propaganda or liaison wallahs or resistance leaders. Once we were stooging round for the predetermined signal, which, of course, must be one that the enemy won't spot. Sure enough it came, the blink of a hooded torch. It's a problem to navigate to hit a torch blink, dead on time. Reassured we turned towards the flare path. Oh, yes, a flare path bang in the middle of Fortress Europe. Tell that one to Goebbels. The flare path can be seen from only one approach and a mighty dim flare path it is — still, there it is. The old Lysander touches down and there's a pause, and then the darkness begins to take shape. This is the prickly moment!

"Has Fritz dropped to it? Has someone collapsed under torture and given us away? Is this an ambush? Watch, if you've ever watched in your life to notice if anyone puts an obstruction in front of the old bus!

"Then there's a word spoken. *The* word. More shapes materialize out of the darkness, there's a quick transfer and an even quicker load-up. There are to be two. Have we both? Then the old bus is turned into the wind. Then the

flare path is extinguished and the glims taken off by the vanishing guerrillas.

"Now we sit and wait. Nobody speaks and the engine ticking over sounds like all the noise in the world. How can they fail to notice it? We all know the reason for the wait but that doesn't help much."

"All right," said I, "I'll buy it. Why the wait?"

Andy blinked. "You see, when coming in to land there's not much row, approaches are always made with the motor just ticking over, but take-off is different. So we sit and wait. When we're sure all our side is clear away it's 'Home, James.'

"When the old engine is opened up the uproar can be heard for miles and is, naturally, quite unmistakable. Most of the populace, however, just don't want to hear. Where was I? Oh, take-off.

"The landing light cuts a slash in the darkness and reveals every furrow in whatever plowed field this one is. The old girl chases her own light down the beam. We get vague glimpses of what's what and what's not. The bumps are criminal.

"Once airborne on the return journey we're a sitting bird for anyone interested. The old Lysander does about a hundred and fifty flat out, and the radio location boys can follow us about easily. We all know this and it doesn't help. Tonight we inch home practically among the hedges.

"From my point of view, as a navigator, coming home is a piece of cake, but the outward journey is a nightmare. It's navigation to an accuracy not of miles, but of yards."

I nodded my sympathy. The mere thought of navigating across Europe to pick up the blink of a torch flashed into the sky for a second or two brought me out in a cold sweat.

"Of course things got better," said Andy on another occasion. "We got better aircraft for one thing, but the going got tougher too. After the pleasure cruises to France and Holland came Denmark, Norway and, on one occasion, Poland."

"Poland!" said I. "Never in your life. That would mean refueling. Come off it, Andy!"

"Sure," said Andy mildly, "that is one to tell Goebbels. Actually refueling under the noses of the Jerries and using their petrol too. A point too is that our big aircraft which we use for these jobs must have a semblance of an airdrome to sit down on. Work that one out, my highly intelligent navigator."

I'll admit the only thing that occurred to me was to use Fritz's but that calls for more hide even than Andy could muster. So I tossed the conversation back to him.

"The airdrome is the guerrilla's pigeon, as is everything else. Sometimes Jerry lets them carry on, even though he knows what's what, and so he gets the whole lot, red-handed. Someone has squealed to save his skin, and I can understand that because the Poles would be tortured with the most ingenuity of all. So he gets the aircraft and crew as a sort of bonus.

"The Danes are well off, the dunes in their country are ideal but there's hardly a level foot in Norway that isn't guarded. Pretty much the same applies to Czechoslovakia."

All this time I'd been trying to put an oar in. After all I'd been to Norway and Denmark too, to say nothing of the Baltic. But the casual mention of Czechoslovakia shut me up. It's all I can do to spell the bloody word.

"We leave England in the late afternoon in winter and climb to over twenty thousand feet. That makes the astro

stuff dead easy. Tonight has been well chosen and there's no cloud up here at all."

I didn't interrupt because I could see that Andy had forgotten me. I didn't mind. In similar circumstances I'd have forgotten *him*. As I write to you I'm trying to forget me.

"It's just getting dark as we cross the coast — dark down there, I mean. We'll have the light for a little while yet. The radio location boys down below pick us up as a matter of course, but as they're expecting, with good reason, a big raid later, they don't take much notice of a solitary aircraft as high as we are. Whoever picks us up first thankfully passes us on to his neighbor's screen. Of course there's always the chance of a night fighter already positioned above us for some other purpose or a fidgety guy on a searchlight.

"Tonight, as the light fails we avoid the first known fighter stations and flak concentrations and, so far, get away with it. The numerous changes of course I find irritating because they play hell with navigation. Still, we're high and we're fast and here we are, in a little cup in the mountains and dead on E.T.A. too. We have to be. Below there's a signal and up here, a reply and here's us. The pilots have to be super to get the crate in at all. In we go! Chaps pop up from nowhere almost before the brakes have shuddered the old girl to a standstill. I never grow used to this minute. My flesh creeps until I hear the word. There's a guttural mumbling for a while and I know the liaison wallah has got cracking in a hurry. Then the ground crew swing us round, and we lumber back to the take-off. There's no unloading until this minute just in case we have to cut and run for it.

"Once the stuff is out we're gone, because we need all the precious darkness we can get for the homeward journey to

say nothing of the idle curiosity of Fritz. The blokes fade into the darkness; we wait. Then all the God-damned uproar of take-off. Wo go high again and I find the astro easier than before. Unfortunately we're in the aftermath of a big raid and Fritz is sore about it. Luckily, at the first place we strike all the fighters are on the ground refueling, and taking on ammo in a fine blaze of light, which showed just how rattled everybody was.

"Halfway home and suddenly, the sky is lousy with fighters, just lousy with them, all looking for stragglers, and a solitary aircraft looks just like that to them. Their radio must be fairly crackling with the gen of the R.L. boys all of whom are on their toes to get us. One smart guy positioned his pair of fighters neatly behind and above us. Nice work, blast his efficient soul. We put on a lame duck act and kidded them into a premature pass. After that we stooged along, altering course from time to time because the visibility is usually pretty duff by the time we get into any cloud that's lying round at that height. We dodge from patch to patch. Barring collisions or a very close pass we're not so badly off. The R.L. boys can position their fighters on us to about four hundred yards, but that's not all the help it might be when we're in cloud. So we get away with it."

Andy stopped and looked at me with a vague air of wondering what I was doing there. I know the feeling. I was an intruder in his private world of retrospect.

Nevertheless, they got Andy: ginger hair, grin, freckles and all. He didn't come back from one of his mysterious missions. That's all we ever knew. Do you know, I wished then that I'd got to know him better. I call to mind tentative approaches he made but I didn't notice them at the time. He'd have made a wonderful friend.

THEY say that some shell has your number on it. Pip doesn't believe it. If he knew Shakespeare he'd say, "Bad accidents happen to bad players." Nevertheless, Pip, accidents, pure accidents, do happen to the most blameless players. As for instance . . .

We were proceeding on our unlawful occasions. From time to time I cast an eye on our flankers to starboard and port. I can't see those astern. The flak is very light, a single blob shows up once in a while, much too scattered to be effective. The fire is probably not even directed, but rather, speculative. Then why on earth should one of these blameless aircraft be hit squarely in the bomb bay?

One moment I was gazing at the gently swaying bulk of a large aircraft; the next I was looking into the sky. We had been rolled through ninety degrees by the blast. When I find time to look again — a few moments elapse while Pip gets us under control again — there's nothing to be seen. Just nothing. No wreckage. No brollies. Nothing. Our old girl creaks and groans a little and she must be a bit strained.

Now, why did it happen to *him*? Why him?

Then again there's the case of a fellow I knew slightly. He'd just completed a tour of duty and was on another station, a training show, giving a series of pep talks. If you can bring yourself to do these they're a wonderful line. Play up courage, play down luck.

Just to get a few things he'd left here he borrowed a trainer. He was thoroughly familiar with that trainer, he'd

cut his teeth on it; he'd been in swags of shaky do's; he was the most competent imaginable pilot; he was in his sober senses and on business bent; certainly not acting the angora; yet a wing came off at under two hundred feet, nevertheless. The inquiry disclosed no earthly reason for it. Everything was exactly as it should be. No one could offer any reason why it should have happened to *that* aircraft. No one thought to ask why it should have happened to *him*.

I could multiply instances. But, to what point? You get nowhere. Which opens up a wide field for irrationality. Superstitions especially. If one isn't superstitious it's hard not to go for religion. Queer, though, how few do. Superstition wins hands down. Or perhaps I should say that simple homely good luck charms have it all over the organized trappings of religion. Perhaps an exception should be made of the St. Christopher medallions so many of the Catholics wear.

Personally I don't believe in it at all. Neither the one nor the other has a thing. Nevertheless, they do seem to do things for those who believe in them. And, for myself, I'd hate to go off on a shaky do without my little tiki. That's not superstition, I'd just feel lonely without it. Of course I don't ascribe any magical powers to it, that'd be very silly and most unscientific, yet it's odd the number of blacks I've put up when not wearing it, so now I take no chances and I wear it all the time.

If I could swap this hellish pain for a painless oblivion, I'd not do it. Nor would you or anybody else. There's something in the mere being alive, no matter on what terms, that's better — incomparably better — than the vast void of emptiness.

The religious hounds say that it's not empty. They're convinced, but they're not convincing. The majority of us just don't believe the padre.

Yet we all want Christian burial, I imagine. Those who talk of cremation should think of incineration. I do. All the time. I think of the marvelously game losing fight my body is putting up. Quite apart from myself I can look on and imagine the battle going on in all my charred portions. Am I pitying myself offensively?

Bit by bit my resistance is being broken down, yet the hopeless fight still continues even though the inevitable end must surely be in sight. I wonder why it had to be me? Why *me*?

The bewildered time-serving of the Protestant padres would be pathetic if it weren't so damned irritating. What is a parson doing in a war anyway? What would their Master, the Prince of Peace, think of them? What must they think of themselves? This war is too big for them. But their Master is not deceived.

The Catholics are on much safer ground. They're utterly *certain*. They don't retreat an inch, they make no terms, they don't compromise. Everything is authoritative, "laid down," and the whole of their dogma is self-consistent. It ought to be. It's been sifted for over a thousand years. Yet, for all its massive, comforting sureness it doesn't appeal much to us. Perhaps because there's no room for the very individual terrors I've just touched on.

I wish I could "unreservedly throw myself on the Lord" which all the sects seem to agree is a good thing. I can't. Not unreservedly. Neither can most of us. So those who have no other roots have their private and joint superstitions. The

latter are common to all the aircrews of the Air Force. If I had the time I'd tell you ours.

Which raises the question as to what went awry with mine. Someone has to buy it every time. But why *me*?

26

You must have heard of these thousand-bomber raids. It's all true. And it's not true that half of them were Tiger Moths. All were honest to God bombers, and most of them carried bombs.

Saturation raids like those are high altitude stuff. Get into the area and unload to give the next fellow a chance. That's the gen. Incendiaries are better value than high explosives, once a few of the latter have opened things up a little. You'd not believe what a city afire looks like. No one who hasn't seen it can form an opinion and it's no good quoting the air-raid wardens because they see only a part of it all. It's we navigators carefully observing for the I.O. who grasp the whole, and I wonder if anyone could be unshaken.

The little jobs we used to do in the early days — those were the days. The individual aircraft carried out its individual assignment and everyone thought that he, personally, was doing something pretty solid about the situation.

I'm not referring to the early, early days. The days when the aircraft brought its bombs back with it if it failed to find its individual target. Bloody lunacy, that. Of course, in the end, what everyone knew would happen *did* happen. A vir-

tuous aircraft, conscientiously returning with a belly full of bombs, may or may not have landed rather heavily. We'll never know how heavily. And what a mess on the runway.

I think we've got rid of that particular folly now. It's time to get rid of a few others. But there was a time . . .

We were bound for Baltic ports. Both Danzig and Stettin were to be honored. That means ten or twelve hours.

In the afternoon we used to get what gen was thought good for us. A spot of blather, then the route, the photos of the target and the landmarks that the other folk might find useful. Usually the best straight stuff came from the Met wallahs. They were tentatively precise, if you know what I mean.

And so to look at the problem. Out and home. Thousands of miles, all of it hostile, either by reason of the human enemy or because of the sea, which is implacably hostile to land-based aircraft. The trouble about a week in the dinghy is a suburban one — trouble with the neighbors.

At dusk, struggle into gear that's never really comfortable, and never quite unbearable. Waddle to the fornicator. All wool and a yard wide. Boots full of socks. How vast and comforting the old girl looks in the gloom. Really bulky and satisfying and safe. Her open bomb doors look like an American union suit with its rear flap down. There's the usual patter. Pilot ju-ju. On a pleasant evening (i.e., one not raining) we just stretch out while the preparedness goes on, then heigh ho, and off to work we go.

It's always a busy evening for me, but, if the Mets know what they are talking about, Alec won't have much to do. Cloud on the water. High cloud too. But a clear area in between. Ideal for discouraging interest from below.

I often wonder what Alec thinks once his wee armored door is closed behind him. He told me he plays games with himself. But can a man do that for twelve hours on end? Whenever you check you'll see the slow methodical movement of his turret. He has his own method of covering his area of action. He'd never shot ducks — just as well for the ducks.

Tell me: how can Alec sit there, endlessly and monotonously covering his sky and yet so instantly alert and active at need? Does something act as a trigger on him? Or is it just he has a merciful gift of making himself oblivious until something calls for a response from him?

All the same, I think even an hour in the turret is long enough to bring that wee armored door to the forefront of his mind.

Climbing on course for the Baltic. There are gray wisps on the North Sea. It'll be thicker when the water is fresher.

Take wind regularly from the drift lanes. The little lines in the dimness can still be seen and used. So far, the Mets and I concur.

Up to clear Denmark. Not that there's a sizable bump in the whole country. But a low-flying aircraft, headed east, can hardly be up to much good and the whole Baltic marshes are honeycombed with fighter stations; probably used as relay stations between the two fronts and hence always alert. Our own very occasional nuisance penetrations into the Baltic would hardly warrant them. We break through the mush and have a look at the firmament. The fix is splendid. We'll hit Danzig fair on the nose.

Down again into our little cloud alley. The fog is drifting

over the sea, but there's ice there too. Little cakes that are probably bigger than they look. Strange that one can see them at all, but they're mighty handy—they define the sea. Without them it would be very hard to tell the gray sea from the gray sky, at least in this gray moonless, gray starless gloom.

I wonder why we're going to Danzig.

The flares light it up in a way you'd not believe. And I suppose we thought the ground fire was pretty fearsome in those days. I hadn't been to Brest in daylight then.

Lying prone I just watched things below. I had the correct wind on the aiming bar, there wasn't enough defense to interfere with the bombing run, so one side of my mind was busy mopping up impressions. Not that I was conscious of it at the time but the recollections were so vivid that there's no other possible explanation; the neatness and tidiness of the city; how crowded the old quarter is; we'll do our share to remedy that.

On a bombing run there may be shells bursting all around us, fighter attacks, air turbulence, and anything else that comes to your mind, but they all take place in somebody else's world. Mine is a narrow world. It runs along the wires of the bomb aimer.

Then, in a second, bombs gone, the other world swamps me and I'm like a frightened child too suddenly awakened. Oh, Danzig.

Neat little houses that all slowly slewed in the one direction as the blast hit them. Neat little houses that suddenly glowed gently and beautifully as the incendiaries took hold in their roofs.

Have you ever seen those rows of colored lights they

string across the streets in New Zealand at Christmas? A string of incendiaries looks exactly like that, except that they're all red. Then a high-explosive bomb scatters the glow into a pattern like a rose garden — you know, a formal arrangement — geometrical, almost. After a while the scattered little roses run together into one big glow. A big glow, black with dense smoke at the edges.

The flares are unnecessary now. If anyone is to follow, the place is all lit up for him. Not that the fires are nearly as useful as the cold light of flares when it comes to identifying a target, but the flares wouldn't penetrate the smoke anyway and the fire is, at the very least, an unmistakable landmark.

And so home. Five hours away. Five hours to bed.

But why Danzig? The Happy Valley, perhaps. Berlin, yes. But why Danzig?

Homeward bound. No real threat of interference.

If one should set a course to a place, bomb it and then set a course for home, should not one be entitled to a little respite? A little time for meditation on the war effort, on the drunken little white houses, and the red glow with the black edges, and on the wicked who shall burn in hell everlastingly.

One man set a course, bombed the little white houses, and brought his crew safely home. The others did as they were told. That may well count in the judgment: for them.

EDDIE was the kind of temporary gentleman that I devoutly hope I'm not and greatly fear I am.

"Your trouble," he told me, "is that you don't know the ropes. The game is to get among those clubs for the wives of servicemen serving overseas. They've got their husbands' allotments. They have houses or flats. And they know what the score is. Why, some of them have been on the wagon for the best part of a year. Their tongues are hanging out. Anyone can do well for himself."

What a bastard! And what a good idea!

Behold me then, off to London with Eddie. Or rather, off to one of the suburbs. We went to a pathetic dance. But first we picked up Eddie's current and choice. She was a thin excitable girl married a few weeks before her man left for overseas. She was madly keen to hang on to Eddie and quite shameless about it. I'm always willing to let a girl keep a few rags of pride. Not so Eddie. I think he was trying to impress me. He did too. But hardly in the way he intended.

What a dance. The few men were outnumbered ten to one. Successive women played the wretched piano. Women danced with each other. Eddie and I were resplendent.

I suggested those circulatory dances, and so got to know almost everyone. I was told names and addresses within minutes, usually.

At the end of the evening I found myself with a party of four jolly buxom women of thirtyish. I got some beer and went home with them. All their flats were on the same floor and there was a certain amount of not too covert jockeying as

to whose flat was to be the venue of the party. We drank the beer and then, apparently following an unwritten code, the other three went home.

We washed the glasses and then I walked round the table to where she sat, looking at the empties. I ran my hand over her hair. She rocked herself backward and forward. I knew her predicament.

She was an honestly married woman. Two children asleep in the back. She loved her family. And she hadn't had a man for over a year. I made it as easy as I could for her. I "forced" her.

Afterwards we got on the queerest terms. We didn't have a damned thing in common. Not a thing. Yet we went for picnics together, went to the pictures, sat in the park, and once went on the river. We found a deep content in each other. I was gentler with her than I'd have believed possible. Except in bed, when I manhandled her in the manner she hoped for.

She talked about her family. She had no other conversation. And that meant mostly Bob. Little by little I pieced Bob together and I grew to like him.

Bob, it appeared, was very much a man. A man any wife could be proud of, a good provider too. He liked his pint but never took too much. It made him jovial. "He'd come home roaring for his meal and if it was something he especially liked he'd pat my bottom as I went past to the stove, and when he'd finished eating he used to wink at me and say 'Well, old girl, how about a run around the henyard?' And afterwards he'd snore like a pig if he got on his back, and if I tried to turn him over he'd wake up and start all over again. Lord, he was strong."

The kids loved him. He whacked them when she told him

they needed it but they loved to play games with him. Chasing games, mostly. He also had an endless fund of children's stories. "About made-up animals usually." On winter Saturdays he went to football, but in the summer they took the children out.

It could hardly be clearer to me that I was a husband substitute and she'd have liked me a little more hearty. Not that she had much to complain of. And beggars can't be choosers.

Sometimes, while having a meal in her clean little kitchen, I'd look across the table at her and see all the domestic virtues before my eyes. But there were depths I didn't suspect. Once, quite without embarrassment, she put to me the plight of one of her friends. This friend was a person of very strict principles but was going a bit cranky for lack of her old man. Would I mind if things were sort of arranged so's she'd be fixed up without sacrificing the very strict principles already mentioned?

As this was the first time I'd ever been farmed out at stud, I was suitably taken aback, which merely made her impatient. Oh, well.

Whenever I could, I dug at Bob. Partly for my own interest, partly to please her. Do you think it odd? Not that I should be interested but that my interest should please her?

Bob, it appeared, was highly skilled and correspondingly well paid, "although margins were not being kept." The Army, unfortunately, apparently made little use of the skill of which he was so proud. All the husbands formerly in the block were skilled men. See the class stigmata? All the wives had that much in common. They had other things in common too. They despised such of their number as were dirty or poor managers. This latter a very serious matter as the

husbands passed over the pay packet and received an allowance from it. The wives did all the managing. Bob's highest praise was to draw attention to the good manager he'd married.

He used to bathe the children when they were small. He said he liked to juggle the little soapy wrigglers. In front of the fire in the winter . . . "and a fine slop of water everywhere. Not that I minded. I was lucky to have Bob and the kids. When the nippers grew big enough they used to take them out when the shops were all lit up and Bob used to buy them odd useless little things just for fun, and because he liked to see them flatten their little noses against the shop windows."

He was very keen on his "rights" too and she was content that he should. "It isn't every woman who has a man like Bob. A lot of women would like to have Bob."

So you see how it was. She needed a man and I was as good as she could reasonably expect but I mustn't think there was anything more to it than that.

Once, just to ruffle the waters, I asked her what would happen if Bob "found out." "He'd kick me out and he'd keep the kids," I was told, "but he's not going to find out." I chewed on that one. Later I discovered that it was all right for a man to play around with women, in some way it was a part of being a man. But it was not all right for a woman. No wife in her senses expected her husband to be any different from other men when in foreign parts but no man should ever know. "They can't bear it. They say they forgive you, but they can't. It's always cropping up."

"What if I were to give the show away?"

"Bob would kill you," she said simply. Certainly a blow

to my private belief that I could handle any Bob who was ever born.

All this time Eddie's leer had been following me around. I just couldn't dodge him. Because I was playing his game he thought I was his kind. The fear that I might be growing that way urged me to put an end to the whole thing.

She took it philosophically. She knew it was bound to come. The world is full of women. It had been good while it lasted and she thought she'd just stick it out until Bob came home. She thought she could. After all she had managed for over a year until I had come along and surely the war would be over before another year had passed. Besides, she wasn't free to everybody.

The last bit was a sop to me, I thought — but no. She was as honest as the day. And as transparent. "You're not my kind," she told me, "but you've been good to me."

We went on the river for the last time. Not in the crowded excursions she loved, but alone. Then she went back to her little flat to stick it out until Bob came home.

28

I WONDER what goes on behind Pip's knobbly forehead. A chap so superbly competent just can't be satisfied by his work alone. There must be some other life he lives. But what? He's not eaten up by women, like some I could name. He's not in the least ambitious. What is he really after?

Queer his dominance over us. I'll bet he doesn't flatter himself his intelligence or education is in the same street as mine, but I'll bet too, he never doubts I'll do what he tells me to do. Everything about him is massive. Which makes his stuck-out ears so odd.

I'm trying so hard to make you see Pip because I just can't believe he's some time dead. There was a sort of welling out of life from him. What I say doesn't evoke Pip. I know that. No words can. But I've got to try. You mustn't forget me, but you mustn't forget Pip either. He was too magnificent to be forgotten. What his hand found to do he did so superbly well. There'll never be anyone again like Pip, will there, Don?

He used to tell us stories of his wharf-laboring days. So completely unaffectedly that I used to wonder, all over again, how he got in. A club pilot perhaps. The stories fascinated me. I learned that the unloading of coal was no good, for it was over too soon. The good jobs were those where every item is handled separately, and by as many hands as possible. He gave us a dozen valuable hints on broaching cargo and smuggling the stuff ashore. He put us wise to the ways of dockside johns. If any of us ever has to make a living by cargo pilfering at least he is well equipped on the theoretical side. And on the moral side too. "Mind you, there's all the difference in the world between pinching from a cobber and broaching a bit of cargo. The bloody shipping companies never feel it."

For your interest Pip's code of honor was one I could never have lived up to. He did. Letter and spirit. It shames me now to think that he never doubted that I did too.

DEAR LORD, I'm all of a tizzy. We're to have a visit from the most I of V.I.P.s. Our station is to be honored by getting the whole works. First the newsreel boys. They showed up nearly a week ago. Their ju-ju requires most careful planning or the Great Man may be photographed showing his uncomplimentary side. Then came the straight reporters shrewdly getting their background stuff in order beforehand. Nothing actually dishonest in that! Not quite dishonest.

Then came the Special Reporters. They prepared their comment on the significance of the visit during a brief tour of duty at the bar. Finally came the V.I.P.'s own "public relations officers." Don't let that kind of louse get into New Zealand.

Anyway, the route of the Grand Panjandrum has been accurately surveyed from all likely angles. Spontaneous enthusiasm is being carefully rehearsed. Alternative routes and enthusiasms for a wet day are also under control, though the Met wallahs have forecast good conditions with no low cloud and visibility up to ten miles—marvelous for an English spring. Typical interviews with and friendliness between V.I.P. and lowly erks have been buttoned up. That's not as easy as it sounds. The erk has to be bright enough not to miss his cues or to be flustered if the V.I.P. misses his; yet not so bright that he steals the show.

And I'm rotting here knowing that if they live long enough, our ineffable politicians will make such a balls-up of the peace that there'll be another war in a generation. Can't they see

that the United States of Europe is their only solution? A federation in which Britain will be one of the powers of medium importance. Of course, the U.S.A. will resist such a thing strenuously. An economic bloc of that size and importance would be a menace.

I suppose these are really Geoff's ideas. He's English, and something else as well. The system in which he grew up must be the most tradition-ridden in the world, so I was quite startled when Geoff told me that the immense value of tradition was that it set up, for all to see, what was best avoided in the future. If there is to be a future. You'd have heard a lot of Geoff, had he lived.

Oh, the V.I.P.? It rained. He stayed in bed.

30

I SUPPOSE hospitals are the same the world over. As you know, I was never in a hospital in New Zealand. I suppose there's the same routine everywhere — the routine which effectively conceals that all that goes on in a hospital is a battle between life and fear.

Why am I not more uncomfortable than I am? One position for so long. I can turn my head through about thirty degrees I think. The maximum I can sweep with my eyes is about the same. Or perhaps I'm just kidding myself. However that may be, I sometimes feel I can cover about a right angle of the ward. The trouble is, that doesn't bring my

neighbor within eyeshot. But it *does* include the door. From my present position anyway.

There was a terrible time when they put me where I couldn't see the door and I endured agonies thinking Don might not come. So long as I could see the door I felt much better. I have no account of time. Not really or clearly. So every time the door opens it might be Don. Of course, most times it isn't, but, so long as I can see that door I know it will open again.

Don always opens the door very carefully. You do so, Don. You don't really expect to find me asleep, do you?

And then his grin travels down the ward. I can almost see it coming. And, having warmed myself by it, my eye always wanders to the paper under his arm. How do you manage to get so much, old horse? Some of it looks like World War One.

The time I was shifted so that I couldn't see the door was terrible. Don would be alongside me before I had time to get used to the idea by watching him approach. Or I'd shut my eyes and count and then not open them until I'd counted to, say, ten thousand. When I did open my eyes sometimes Don would be there. Sometimes not. Most times not. If he weren't there I'd not start again.

It got so bad I spoke to the nurse who understood English. At least that's what I think she did. And, by the way, what accounts for women nurses? Am I in a civvy outfit? If so, why? And why is there never anyone in my range of vision opposite?

Anyway, I spoke to this nurse about it and she understood and was distressed. Her very big faded blue eyes suffused and she took her large frame off to do something about it. It

took some time to get the wheels of authority turning, so she used to come to talk to me when her duties permitted. It was quite a while before I dropped to it that it wasn't pity for me that impelled her.

Always she talked of Hans. Her Hans.

They were to be married. Soon. The promise dated from the day that Hans went off to war. He fought in Poland and Russia. Was very severely wounded and left for dead, but picked up by a German counterattack. But in the meantime he had been badly frostbitten. All this emerged as Bertha worked over me. I don't know her name, so Bertha will do.

Hans was a good soldier and a good man. Very faithful and very uncomplaining. But, ach, his poor, poor feet. And then the great heavy tears would fall on my face.

They had a little haven in the rubble, all their own. For who would want it? They lived together and were to be married. Soon. How soon, Bertha? And did I think they were doing wrong? But then, of course, how could I know? Bertha, my dear, I knew once! And do let me tell you to seize your living while you have it!

Hans worked at something or other essential. She did tell me but I've forgotten. He worked but he couldn't stand. Not for more than a few minutes at a time. His poor, poor feet. It was quite a while before I dropped to it that he didn't have any. The frostbite, naturally.

He was very kind and understanding. But he didn't speak much. He was much quieter than when he went away. He just sat and stroked her hair. Silently. Perhaps he too was happy with his moment while he had it. To have each other. Against the world.

Between them they could live. Just. Food wasn't so bad.

One did what one could. But Bertha shuddered at the thought of winter. No fuel. She didn't fear for herself. Not at all. But for Hans's feet. So did I.

You probably think it highly unlikely that people confide in me the way I say they do. You don't realize how I've changed since you knew me. Apart from navigation, only my fellow man interests me. I like to think I have a wry curiosity as to what makes him tick. Hence all my eavesdropping. I suppose you guessed that from my stories of what goes on inside aircraft. That I eavesdrop shamelessly, I mean.

31

THE night is so comforting. It puts great protecting arms round deserving aircraft. I can honestly say that I've never been lost on any job of work once night has fallen.

For example, there's a little affair involving the railway marshaling yards at Hamm. Since our interest Fritz has re-routed a lot of his railways and substituted a host of small junctions for such mammoths as Hamm. Much less efficient, of course . . . but safer. All the same the more he disperses the more strain he puts on his transport system. At least, that's Andy's opinion and I can't see much wrong with it. There's not usually much wrong with Andy's opinions.

Hamm. We managed to slip across the coastline without being spotted, or so we thought. Remember this is the early days about which I'm prone to get mighty tedious. Still, they were the days. Not spotted, did I say? Well, there are no lights and the whole countryside looks to be virtuously abed.

No cones of light, no, but shadowy forms begin to gather around us as ground control puts the night fighters on our track. Now they have something. Working in pairs, as they do at this time of war, one makes a dummy attack while the other presses his home from a different angle. The trouble is to make up your mind which is which. Not that that's my worry, officially, but it's everyone's worry all the same. Which is which? The Yanks have a sort of fire controller who coordinates the drill of the gunners and the pilot. A damned good idea. We should adopt it.

Well then, which is which again? And the little bastards have cannon too. Don't let anyone kid you the Me. 109 is no good. I don't know anyone who would even try.

There's none of that sick feeling of inevitability that goes with searchlights. When you see those long fingers of light reaching up towards you, your stomach contracts because you know with a horrible certainty they're going to pick you up. You can feel something in the aircraft attracting them. And their slow sweep is as undeviating as fate. The waiting frays the nerves almost beyond endurance. One can almost hear them snap. There's nothing you can do about lights except avoid them. Mind you, that's a good line with fighters too.

But fighters are different. You can get stuck into them. Not that any bomber wants to fight. It doesn't. With fighters there's no worry much about what you can see; the hellish tight feeling is about what you can't see. The yammer of our guns, the leisurely curves of the tracer, pro and con, the smell of burnt powder, the violent evasive action all make up a most disconcerting pattern of apparently unordered behavior. Very upsetting for a navigator who is, by definition, a model of ordered behavior.

Tonight, as always, the fighters seem to approach slowly

in the shadowy fashion of bats. Then in one sudden sweep . . . whew . . . that was a close one! Our guns. Tracer. The immediate urgency of violent evasion.

Nothing for me to do, of course. Except air-plot for my life . . . for all our lives.

The fighters drop away. Out of fuel or ammo or both. I look for damage and casualties. That's my job. Alec is patching up a flesh wound and to judge from his language he'll survive. There's minor structural damage where we took a couple of cannon shells aboard. Nothing to write home about. But everybody's very edgy and every little shadow cast by a cloud across the moon becomes a fighter. Gunners have been known to loose off a burst "just in case."

Tonight there's broken cloud and a hunter's moon, and *we're* the hunted. One fighter station after another spews up its squadrons at us. We nip from one bit of cloud cover to another. Pity the poor navigator. Pity *me*.

Finally it is obvious to them that we're swinging left-handed to Hamm and not to Essen to starboard. Still not a light! But the fighter attacks are pressed home much harder. We are near the middle of the concentration and usually they try to get Tail-End Charlie first, but tonight they come at us from above and from underneath and that's a real horror. Quite slowly. One on our starboard dropped back until he had nearly reached the tail of the concentration. They know they have him. They butcher him expertly. He staggers straight and level for a moment, then, engines aflame and yawing wildly, in he goes. Christ, we're sorry to see him go. I sweat like a pig. So does everybody else, I swear. The stench inside is horrible and the peculiar whump of hits on us are not so much heard as felt through one's whole body.

Jesus, how they press in! The sky is lousy with them and the precious cloud cover blows away . . . all that beautiful cloud over some other bloody place where no one needs it!

Then, suddenly, here's Hamm. We should have known. The night fighters wheel off rather like sea birds. They all moved to port so, shrewdly, we all edge off to starboard. It's what the bastards want. All of a sudden, God in Heaven, here are the lights! Lights, more even than at Cologne. When they come on like this you have the idiotic idea that the beam is climbing towards you. Personally. Then the long fingers begin to trace great arcs in the sky. From directly above they don't look long at all but they lengthen in a most sinister manner as they move away. What am I saying? They *shorten* in a most sinister manner as they *approach*.

There's some master plan by which they quarter this area. The bloody things seem to follow you, even to anticipate you, and as soon as one of them picks up one of our poor bastards the others switch on to him with a ghoulish rapidity and cone him. You can see their horrible slim lines hurrying across the sky to cut off his escape, and you know that no evasive action can save him. There are too many guns per cone.

Queer how light panics us. And it's such an unnatural light. We all look a ghastly sallow yellowish green and eyes glint in a most sinister fashion, just because the light catches them that way. It isn't the friendly golden gleam of the sun — it's like the inside of a crematorium.

Anyway, there's Hamm and here's us! Well, let's to it.

On the bombing run. All things else are out of mind. I snarl at Pip who is probably performing minor miracles to keep the old girl even remotely on track. We swing on to the

target and line it up first time. I signal "Bombs gone" and get to hell out of the nose. Alec reports bursts right in the target area though how the devil he can see beats me. These new flares we use are so powerful we need shades to see downward. Anyway, Alec said there are bursts all over the target, and who should know that kind of target better than Alec.

We got out all right, which is more than a lot of others do. We rendezvous but don't dare wait for stragglers. Going home they must run the gauntlet individually of all we took, together, coming out. No wonder many stragglers buy it. The real wonder is so many survive.

Still, the arms of night are all about you and you're not quite so scared. We have the absurd idea that now Fritz has failed to stop the raid he ought to call it a day.

But what I remember most of Hamm is when our flares lit up the yards, paling even the searchlights. A giant marshaling yard is the loveliest thing . . . its rails gleam in the torrent of light in the most wonderful ordered geometrical pattern. Rakes of trucks don't disturb the eye as it runs along the ribbons. They serve merely to emphasize the dominant scheme. A railway yard is an exercise in logic.

Return at dawn. Not daybreak yet, but the promise of it in the sky. Thank God no one knows how panic-stricken I was just before Pip slipped the lights. As soon as I've had a bit of sleep I'll ring Freda. Lord I do want to feel a man again.

I suppose you're a little impatient with my preoccupation with myself. What of it? I interest me.

And Freda and all the others? Does all this sound like dissertations on the related themes of sex and fear? They *are* related, you know. And my life in the Air Force is largely

these, plus a dash of professional pride in being a bloody fine navigator; one of the best. A man is supposed to develop under all the pressures to which we are subjected. I don't think anyone I know shows any such signs and I guess my nature hasn't changed much.

To hell with all the moralizing! I was bloody scared. And so would you have been!

32

No one can blame the women. It has been a tradition of soldiering since long before Alexander that the enemies' women were part of the spoils of battle. It is only in recent years that the women of our allies have fallen into the same category. In the last war, French girls were a bit of all right, although I can't help thinking that, when the troops were making the comparisons with the home product, they took the highly skilled practitioners abroad and stacked against them the run of the mill at home. In England, now, the New Zealander is so much better paid than the native that the latter just cannot compete for the favors of his own women. The net result is very satisfactory from our short-term point of view but it is probably less so for the Englishman and the girl. Who cares? Life is catching up with us and we've only a little time so we may as well cram it full. This is about Freda.

It's all very well to talk about the wives. Look at the allowance a munificent government pays them as a token of how

highly it regards the private soldier. Wouldn't our women squeal? But then, we'd never allow that type of government. The wonder is not that so many of them prefer an easier way than war work to eke out their pittance, the real wonder is that so few of them do. The average British working-class wife, married ten years, isn't very appetizing anyway. But the troops are not fussy.

There has grown up, however, a class of good-time girls who pass from bed to bed among the officers. Some are frankly as promiscuous as rabbits. Others stick to the one of the moment, while the moment lasts. It's not a businesslike, cash transaction, though a present of money is very acceptable, as is anything else readily convertible. Most of them work in offices and used to live in dingy boardinghouses. Now they all have flats. It's so necessary if one wishes to entertain one's friends.

Freda was one of them. She was the best of company, danced well, fell in with any suggestions, organized parties or went to them, beat up other girls. She always dressed to suit the occasion, and that meant some mighty smart observation in times past. She had an acute ear for accent and it never played her false. No matter where you took her. She was never tired, never sulky. She was the perfect chameleon.

Freda wanted a good time. "We're only young once." Oh, Freda, how right you are!

So we drank, perhaps a little more than we should, we danced at cabarets and parties, we went to shows (and very good some of them were), we came home to her flat round about dawn. We had a couple of drinks. We went to bed. Just like that.

Do you know, when I try to think of when I first met her, or

even how first I went to bed with her, I just can't remember. It seems to me that I must have always been going to bed with Freda. So you see the shape of the relationship? Yet it wasn't as sordid as you'd think. True, I paid for lots of things for her and, when thinking of presents, I always bore in mind that a girl must live and they all had ready value. I used to stock up the flat, since a girl must eat, but I'd be damned if I'd stock it with liquor. Let the other blokes bring their own.

All the same, Freda did much more for me. You see, her flat was somewhere to return to. While I was there I was, at least temporarily, home. I always let her know well in advance when I was coming to town. I owed her that and I had no desire to embarrass her. No hint of jealousy marred our relationship. While I was there she was my girl and I never worried further than that. Sometimes when loneliness welled all over me I'd test my patience against "long distance" and hope she'd be in when the call eventually got through. I'd hint that I'd like to come to town. Sometimes she'd say, "Come up right away." I used to laugh a little at the eagerness in her voice. Other times she'd fix a time, in a day or so. We both understood perfectly.

Perhaps we'd do a hectic round, but once warm and half asleep, I'd feel so damned grateful to her I'd make the wildest love to her. The first time she was quite startled but once she got used to it we found we were very well adjusted, as the American euphemism has it. She began to look forward to my visits. So did I. Gradually we began to drop out of our former circles, and to spend evenings at home in a simple, even childish, way. Freda learned to cook. She went to the night classes run by the local gas company and I had a hell of

a time for a while. Then, all of a sudden, the knack came to her.

Then, one night, we decided to do all our old haunts again. We went to a show but, somehow, it wasn't as good as it used to be. We went dancing, but knew fewer people than before, and they were not as lively as before, or so we thought.

When we were home we looked at each other. We were both thinking the same thing. "We're getting into a rut. We're losing our dash. We're out of it. We're growing old. We've had it."

Then, suddenly, I didn't care. I just picked her up bodily and rumbled her hair — she pretended to hate it — and we both knew, without any words, that we were on another footing. A quite different one.

It was about two months later that they deflated her left lung. A spot on the lobe, or something worse. Of course she'd recover. After a year or so in a sanatorium. So much can be done these days.

I made all the necessary arrangements. When next I met her she was already vastly changed, calmer and much better balanced. She was "a good patient." I told her what I planned, made elaborate arrangements to visit her, promised to write frequently and so on and so on. You know how it is.

But I hate and loathe sickness. Always have. She knew it too. She'd never asked me for anything in all our association, so I was quite startled when she asked for my cap badge. Clumsily, I took it off and gave it to her. We both knew what we were doing. There were to be no wedding bells. Bells, perhaps. But not wedding bells. The bright bubble had burst.

I walked home as conscious as hell of my lack of a hat badge. I thought everyone was looking at my head. It made me angry with her and with myself. Of course I wrote, I'm afraid at lengthening intervals, but I couldn't bring myself to visit her. I was afraid of what I might see. The actual look of Freda was so much of her.

She replied to my letters. Long cheerful letters, full of yesterdays, but she never wrote in the intervals of my infrequent notes. But the long gay reply always came by return mail.

She never complained, never, indeed, referred to her illness. She deliberately reduced all the highlights of our relationship to monotones. And she did it because she knew I hated illness.

I wonder if she ever did recover.

33

ONE thing about this place. It is certainly warm. Tucked up in bed as I am there's no discernible difference in the twenty-four hours. Yes. It's certainly nice and warm, so I suppose that's why I'm thinking so much of the bad days, when we went to Norway, for example. Not the good summer runs with Geoff. Oh, no! It was very different when Pip and I were on that run. It amazes me now how little we knew and how well we managed on that little.

When we were first ordered north it was early days and the

jaunt to Norway represented about the limit of the old girl's endurance; at least if we were to have any time in the target area and carry any bombs. Naturally, we operated from one of the most northerly airfields in Scotland. I know all this secrecy about names is childish but I'm scared some Jack-in-Censor's-Office may hold these letters up. Dear God, what a god security is. Anyway, the airfield was in Scotland.

In summertime, one takes off in the long evening twilight and the night is a mere formality if the job is in the northern part of Norway, and it usually is. Lovely settled weather. Long summer nights. Remember them, Geoff?

In winter things were vastly different.

Take-off well before dawn. Grossly overloaded of course. We'd been carefully briefed, which means we'd been told most of what the blokes didn't know. No one knew much in those days and the Met was largely guesswork. And wasn't it bitter, bitter, cold.

Waddle to the old girl, nicely filled out with food, burdened with rations, a small aviary, pigeon baskets. The ground crew working with the peculiar slowness of men half frozen and half asleep. When challenged they always denied being half asleep and insisted that they were, in fact, half awake, but, either way, it's no comfort to the blokes whose necks depend on what they do, or fail to do. All the same they're really rather marvelous. They keep aircraft airworthy in conditions when an albatross would be grounded.

In the darkness their shadowy forms going about the last-minute checks are peculiarly comforting. As they knock off chunks of ice here and there and whine about their dog's lives there's a fine homely air about the proceedings. The airfield's a temporary one and they really do have grounds for complaint, but they'd invent them if they didn't.

Have you ever experienced a frozen fog? We have it all winter. Aye. The Scots are a hardy race. But don't believe all you hear about their hardiness. Alec went out one night with a bonny bit lass and found her so protected against the cold that he gave up the unequal struggle. He had a few poignant things to say about frozen heather, too. Moreover it appeared the lass had a deplorable pawky sense of humor. Poor Alec.

The old girl is worked into position and in the slap-happy way of temporary fields we get our clearance. All the familiar guff but I never get used to the prickly moment at take-off when the old girl is making up her mind about coming unstuck. We take the full length of the runway and a howling gale blasting down is no help at all. You see, when there's a gale (most times), all they do is to increase the all-up load, probably from a deficient knowledge of physics. Poor old girl. And she *is* old too. She lumbers down the runway, picking up speed in an agonizingly slow way. We all sort of *wish* her into the air.

Airborne. Set course. Gyro set? Climb in the fog or cloud. Call it which you please. What course, navigator?

No chance of seeing anything. No visual checks. No astro. Can't climb. Plenty of radio all mixed up with the Aurora Borealis. Don once got me a most extraordinary radio bearing. You did, Don, old horse, and I'm *not* imagining it. The only thing we could get to match it was the moon, if we are where we think we are; where *I* think we are.

Approaching Norway and its stuffed clouds; clouds stuffed full of mountains. This time we're in luck. The draught which always goes up and down a fiord because of the temperature differences is our friend. We recognize the fiord. Our fiord. The photo tallies exactly. So Pip and I make up

our minds to sneak up the fiord practically on the water, relying on the fog to confuse anyone trying to locate us. When I think of it now I realize how mad we were. Think of it: the narrow winding fiord, nothing to see, just estimation and the map.

34

YOU'LL object — you were always objecting to something — that it's morbid to be so interested in oneself. So what? I'm all there is of me. When I die, what's left? I want someone to remember me and I've picked on you. Why pick on you? Do you, of all people, seriously ask me that?

It's the nothingness I'm afraid of, so I've drawn everything together so you'll remember the contrasts whatever else you forget. Don't forget me utterly, will you?

Did you really worry about us? Or was that just a line good for the morale of grounded pilots. We all thought you did and it bucked us up no end just when our arses had all been knocked in. We knew you fought our battles with the Air Department and we all thought you might be doing it from personal interest in us. "Thought," did I say; "hoped" was as high as we dared put it.

Perhaps things aren't always quite the way I tell you but everything Don's taken down is spiritually true. The essential guts of things is as I tell them to you. I've just stripped off the unessentials that stop most folk from seeing the bones under the skin of happenings. There's a fine vindication of

the law of probability in all we do and I've just drawn things together in time and place to show the pattern. Everything that happens to us is really well rounded off with no loose ends, if we'd only look at it that way. People speak as though poetic justice were the exception rather than the rule. They just don't see. I do. Now.

It's just that nothingness I can't bear. I was the liveliest guy that ever was. Or was I merely a conceited twerp who thought so.

You'll object again, that I ought to dress things up in their chronological order and put in the mass of detail which makes most photographs such messes. Why the hell should I? You said yourself that our training was selective, that life was selective. Do you now object just because I am being selective?

At nights, after Don's square back has gone down the ward, I lie awake; I don't sleep much, and I plan. I go over and over what I'm getting ready for next day and make mental notes. Next day is when Don comes again. It's as simple as that. While I'm waiting for Don's face to come into my range of vision I give my pictures their final vetting, and then I get so damned interested that I only find out at the end what it was all about. Don never says a word: just goes like hell. Don, old horse, are you pitying me? Frankly I don't mind pity at all. I spend a lot of time in pitying myself. And the rest in thinking about the man I was. People who grow old gradually have time to become reconciled to their body's decay. I can't. It's been too rapid for me. I'm shocked by my own disintegration.

I'd hate to reach the age when young men called me "Sir" and even more I'd hate young girls to offer me a seat in a

tram, but most of all I'd hate to die. Next to dying I hate most the idea of growing old, but as that's the only way to live a long time, what then? Apparently I'm to be spared the indignity of growing old. Yet old people seem so serene. I often wonder if they did indeed pass through the fire of youth without burning some, at least, of their tail feathers. My youth was as I tell you. What I say happened did happen. It's just the telescoping of it in time that makes it seem so improbably well rounded off.

Growing old gradually one would scarcely notice the change from day to day. Besides, no one ever thinks of himself as growing old. Of course the children shoot up and grow impertinently independent. I suppose when the old gentleman with the scythe taps them on the shoulder they turn with surprise and say, "Who? Me? Why, I'm in the prime of life."

Of course, old folk — very old folk — exaggerate their ages, but are pathetic about "being in full possession of all their faculties." And, all of a sudden, here am I, old. Old, like them. Ripe for the reaper. Rotten ripe.

I suppose I'd not be very convincing if I shot a bloody hero line now. Not after all I've said. I'm no bloody hero. I'm just a guy caught up in something too big for him.

I always feel a bit of a goat when fellows are talking about their near misses. Until this last time nothing much has ever happened to me. The aircraft used to get themselves shot about somewhat, we lost a few gunners and we wrote off an aircraft or two on returning. Yet all that has happened to me is bruises. Unfortunately, where they don't show.

In the company I keep, that isn't enough even to buy cards. You know about Pip and Geoff. They both wear the air of mild interest proper in one who knows it all. And Don

walked down the escape chute out of Holland. Nearly everyone I know has either baled out or been decanted. The members of the Caterpillar Club are not, themselves, assertive, but the fact of membership is.

Won't someone please collect all these stories before they have the faded familiarity of a family photograph? Most of my friends couldn't describe what happened to them. Not if they tried till Doomsday. And the stories could easily get into some greasy journalist's hands. Won't you do it? We all talked to you. It was a little like talking to God for a start but we got over that. Do go round and listen. Then fill in the things that they think are common property but are not. Tell the stories as they should be told. Stories of quite ordinary blokes in quite extraordinary situations. And how they coped. How, since they couldn't alter themselves, they altered the situation and bent it to their own ends. There'll be some great escape stories after the war ends. If the war ends. Those who were in the bag will have some good ones but I wonder if the best won't be of those who cheated the bag. And the reaper too.

Imagine a common or garden civvy carpenter, arrayed in all the splendor of an R.A.F. sergeant's uniform, blithely setting out to walk a hundred miles across Fortress Europe to the sea. Confident that the sea, being British territory, would bring forth his deliverance. He knew two words of German. *Guten Morgen*. Pronounced in the way they do in Birmingham. He also knew one complete sentence in French, but as it was only useful with like-minded ladies, it wasn't all the help it might have been. Moreover, he always had difficulty in interpreting the answer unless it took the form of assault. So far as I know he didn't know if the noises heard in Hol-

land had or had not any meaning to the initiated ear. Yet he made it. It took him a fortnight.

He told me . . . "When I found I was on my own I hid my chute at once and then I sat down on my bum to nut it all out. It seemed to me that the only thing to do was to head north for the sea. A bit west of north actually. Nearer that way. I saw no reason for any local excitement and I had no intention of raising any. I didn't want to force myself on anyone's attention."

And what about the gunner who got a crack or two when ground fire caught his aircraft in North Africa. He was the sole survivor. He dragged himself out of the smoking wreckage "because I thought it would be a good thing to do first . . ." The desert was as empty as a city church and he was in no condition to travel. He managed a few hundred yards and then fell into a hole from which some Ities had been watching him with mild interest. He told me . . . "if I'd had any sort of weapon I'd have made them carry me back to a British unit but they had all the cards." They put him in the bag. They were decent enough though, and got him back to a forward aid post. He was hardly comfortable there when our long-range desert patrol dropped in on the proceedings and altered the whole situation. They had no means of shifting him so they just left him in charge of all the lethal stuff, after fixing his position by a little solar navigation.

The Ities didn't mind. They were most cooperative. One, who spoke a little broken English, even told him that a spot of leisure in a P.O.W. camp was just what suited his military temperament. All was going as merrily as a brewery wedding when someone noticed that the approaching tanks had a most unfortunate silhouette. As the English speaker said

gloomily, "Now it looks as though we're right back in the war again." So they were. It would be Fritz. He can never leave a good situation alone. That's what may lose him the war yet.

However, he was in no hurry: so rapidly rereversing the situation he departed for points east. Where it is devoutly to be wished that he ran into a minefield.

Our gunner "had it out with the Itie who could catch on." He pointed out that nothing was really much changed, in that the P.O.W. camp was just as leisurely as before. The delicate matter, though, was the others and the dangerous weapons they handled. Eventually an Italian compromise was reached. One section went west to seek the enemy and would be certain to come up with him if it is true that the world is round. The other crowd went east . . . "Me with them." And that was that.

As I heard the story I was told . . . "and in all the arguing it was most important not to show too much interest in the firearms, but, gosh, it was tempting just to make a quick grab at them and cut all the blather short. The lecturer who told us that Italian was the most beautiful language in the world — he played a bunch of records afterwards, remember? — should have had to listen as I did."

I could go on endlessly. Don't let them fall into the wrong hands. And do collect them. Fill in the gaps while there's still a chance. I doubt if any of them has more than one story worth the telling, but isn't that one story worth the telling? The whole of life in a minute of time. All the rest of his days he'll remember that moment when the universe revolved round him.

All I need is time, just a little time. Enough to let com-

passion shape the formless rages and bitterness. You're getting the overflow.

I'd have come to see you of course. Probably with a mass of half-digested ideas and an untidy handful of manuscript. I wonder if you'd have tried to take it over from me? On balance, perhaps not. You did let us make our own nav. mistakes but, even now, I'm not sure if your attitude was masterly inactivity or plain laziness.

Given time I should have been able to tell you so much. Where love of life ranks among the other compulsions. It's differently placed with different men, of course, but what's interesting is the things which outrank it. They're surprising and most revealing. Given a little time I could have told you something about men under tensions — not tension — tensions. No one tension breaks a man. It's the resonance of many tensions and, when they're all in phase, the man is shaken to pieces. But you know, and I know, that if I were given the time I'd not really come to see you, with or without my untidy bundle of manuscript. It's just the being no time that brings me to write at all.

In the beginning, as you must know by now, I wanted to write about myself. I wanted you to remember me. Still do. But I wanted, also, to remember myself. Hence all the autobiography.

Then all sorts of other folk crept in. After all, a man *is* his associations. And, as I thought of them there was something memorable about them all, something entitling them to space in your mind. Usually it was just one thing lodging just one claim not to be forgotten. With Pip and Geoff and one or two others it was different of course. I hope you see them in the round as I do; and not just for a moment, illuminated as if by lightning.

DON and I were amiably chewing the fat. The point at issue being the "geodetic" construction of our old Wimpy. Don was of the considered opinion that the basket-weave type of airframe was a misguided attempt to revive village crafts. That was pretty big of him as he comes from a village in the Welsh Marches.

Pip hove in sight and listened bemusedly to us for a moment and then said "Briefing Room, half an hour. What have the silly bastards dreamed up that's so urgent?" But all the same, he was mighty interested. And so was I. Who wants to brief us at this time?

And God help us, when we got to the Briefing Room, there, as large as life and twice as ludicrous, was a security officer from Air Ministry. All names were being taken and there was a fine cloak and dagger air about the proceedings which I found vastly entertaining, so I was really angry when Pip spoiled it all.

Once we were safely in and accounted for, Pip heaved himself upright, walked over to the security bloke and nearly wrecked the enterprise. "We all know each other here," he began, "but we don't know you. A security pass isn't good enough. Is there anyone here who will vouch for you?"

I thought the security bloke was going to have twin pups. He spent his life questioning the bona fides of others! This was too much! I was dead scared that the situation wouldn't develop, but I needn't have worried. The S.O. was on his mettle. Under Pip's cold and doubting eye he produced an impressive array of corroborative material, while I worked

like hell to keep the Stationmaster from queering the pitch. In the end Pip reserved judgment but agreed to listen to what he might have to say. It was worth listening to.

There was to be a mine-laying program of a very special kind. Mines were to be laid with pinpoint accuracy right inside a certain Norwegian fiord. A special course of instruction would be necessary under conditions of maximum security. The course would take only two days since only one technique had to be mastered. Well!

We were drifting out when the Stationmaster intercepted us. Back we went to see the S.O. in a small side room. The bloke who had done most of the briefing was there too, with a brass hat who was a big shot in navigation. Well well, my friends, why us? This was early days, remember, and we were very easily unimpressed.

It appeared that a great deal was not known about this pinpoint everyone had talked about so blithely. In fact maps and charts were known to be defective but defective in what way? The highly intelligent aircrew will see at once how important it is that these matters should be adjusted before worse befalls. The highly intelligent aircrew also sees who is to do the dirty work.

To our extreme surprise we were put through another briefing right away and it wasn't nearly as confident as the former. Indeed there were distressing lacunae. Moreover we were informed we were going on to the job at once, straight from the room to the aircraft which was even now being prepared. We could have several hours sleep, right here. Security run mad. So that was why we were briefed at such an odd hour. Wonder what the other blokes made of it, especially if they saw us being detained.

It was still dark when we went over to the old girl. If there's one place in all the world to avoid on climatic grounds, it's the east coast of Scotland. The denizens say that a "snell" wind blows off the sea. It does. And ice crackles underfoot and the wet cold bites into one's bones.

As we walked Pip rumbled in my ear. "Now we're rid of those bastards, what do you make of all this?" I was never one to miss a chance to air my views, so I sounded off, as the Yanks say.

"In the first place there's some mighty special reason for laying a mine lane in a fiord. Either that's the route usually followed and we are to catch something special there, or . . ."

"Or what?" asked Pip, and we all stopped for a moment.

"Or the lane is for some ship to be *safe* in."

I still wonder which one it was.

The old girl doesn't like being run up this morning. Slug-gish. Just like us. Even the pigeons in their pigeon basket looked sluggish.

And so for Norway. Sleety showers interspersed with hail. Really handsome icing. As we wait as much time over the area we are full to the ears of petrol but have only a few bombs for targets of opportunity. Endurance? Say, ten hours.

The dawn comes reluctantly with steely showers. You tell me which is sea and which is sky. When we come down to have a look I get cold feet and so we climb to five thousand again. Safer. In mid North Sea there's no show of interception so everyone's happy. Except me. Since I have no man-

ner of fix since departure, you tell me how we are doing. A loop bearing, did you say? With all that static?

When the light gets better, we have a look at the sea and the wind lanes confirm the Met forecast. So far, so very good. When we've used a little more fuel we'll try the sun.

It proves harder than expected to get above the mush and my shot of the sun is hazy. Still the position line puts us on track.

Dead on E.T.A.: a few small islands. Good. The entrance to the fiord is somewhere close. But wait a minute! Every fiord has a couple of small islands at its entrance, it's the nature of the country.

We edge up the fiord. Just about a thousand feet below the crests of the mountains. But visibility is very bad. I toy with the idea of sitting right on the sea and Pip is willing provided I can guarantee we don't run into a blank wall of rock with no time to climb over it. I can't. So we stay where we are. The fiord narrows. Then . . . Jesus Christ! Anti-aircraft fire! What the hell does this mean? The old girl plunges wildly; a hit? Alec confirms the hit, and Pip's in trouble. The old girl's out of control for a moment. Then Pip has her again.

Down flat on the water we go. Who gives a curse for the blank wall of rock? That Hun commander shouldn't be in Norway. Too intelligent. Guns halfway up the side of the fiord! Bloody cunning. But Pip is cunning too. Anti-aircraft guns are not made to fire downward, so we sit on the water. Good for you, Pip. But a hydraulic pressure line is gone and things start to go to hell rapidly. Christ, that water looks cold. Pip cuts off that line. So, *mes braves*, if you don't mind manhandling a big Wimpy we might see you home.

We climb, dead on track up the fiord. Pip lifts her as fast as he dares. I've never been so glad to have five thousand on the clock. And so we turn for home. It wasn't so bad was it? Now to think about it.

It certainly isn't coincidence that the battery was dead on that pinpoint. It's as well we found that out in time to cancel the show now that Fritz is wise to a possible attempt. Attempt at what? On second thoughts was there anything moored under the guns, hard in against the cliff? Everyone was too busy to notice. I wonder.

A hell of a journey home. Must have been a nightmare for Pip. A wide turn without flaps. A most clumsy approach. A very heavy sit-down.

Bless me. Look at the reception committee! Crash wagon. Blood cart. Fire crew. All the trimmings.

When the riggers looked at the damage it was just the merest fluke. One lone glancing hit which took out a section of the hydraulic gear. Repair it in half an hour. And it nearly dunked us in the fiord!

The I.O. was keenly interested but a bit nervous. So he should be with all that scrambled egg breathing down his neck. I've never heard questioning so precise as the cross examination that followed.

Then, almost gently the axe fell. We were to catch up on some sleep and then join the other crews already briefed. Holy Hell!

So the show was not to be called off! Ever put your head in a lion's mouth? Catch up on some sleep!

The special training involved an approach at five thousand,

but the mine was to be laid from fifty feet. And dead to a pattern supplied. What's the big idea? So few of us that someone must be mighty sure of the exact time and place. But what? "Something really important," we were told. Who'd have guessed? "And time to seconds is important too."

And so the pitcher goes again to the well.

A morning no dog should be abroad in. As Pip ran the old girl up, I'll swear the exhaust gases froze solid at the flame arresters. Cold! It *was* cold. "Snell."

We don't want to go and hope that something will go wrong, but nothing does. With our luck, if anything goes wrong it will be squarely in that bloody fiord. What's there, anyway?

It's comforting to be in company as we head across the North Sea, more comforting to them than to me as I'm supposed to be doing the masterminding. Still, here are those blasted islands and here are we. Approach at five thousand is the drill. So we approach at five thousand. The icing had been very bad coming over but it is worse here because of the nearness of the peaks, and control gets a bit iffy from time to time. Furious downdrafts too. We dropped nearly a thousand feet in one of them. And keeping in formation was the devil's own job, partly because the visibility was so bad. Still we kept on track up the fiord, occasionally losing one of the party and finding the silly bastard again just as we had given him up.

Nearer and nearer to the time and place. When we must come down to fifty feet. Because it's not safe to drop the mines from any higher altitude.

This is it!

We sneak down to the water and the sleeting showers

make it mighty difficult to tell exactly where the water is. But we make it. Low on the water the guns can't be depressed enough to get us, but if the area is so bloody important I wonder if Fritz has a fighter squadron operating from the goat tracks hereabouts? Round the bend we come and the drifting showers ease enough for us to see the pinpoint clearly, and there, blast my eyes, bang in the middle of the area is a smallish craft, not anchored (the fiord is too deep for that), but either drifting or just making steerage way. Is this what we've come all this way to do in? Seems absurd. Anyway, we have to attack it because it is squarely where the mines are to go. All this flashes through my mind while we are closing on it, and we lead in to let him have the few bombs we have, but the sum total of bombs in the formation is ample for the job.

Still, easy, Pip. Fifty feet is only fifty feet. Line up. Run in. Just a piece of cake. Unescorted tramp. Won't even hold us long enough to worry us about endurance . . . steady . . .

We were almost on her when the whole bloody sky blew up. At first I thought Fritz had guns down at the water's edge. But no! It was the ship. She bristled with anti-aircraft gun positions. We were hit all over the place and all control went to hell. I couldn't even release the bombs. The bomb doors stayed open and wouldn't close. The old girl reared up almost vertically and then flopped sideways. All this at fifty feet, remember! I felt Pip slam her into fine pitch and knew we hadn't lost that control. Fine pitch! Throttles wide open! Through the gate! One wing tip touched the water. By main strength Pip clawed her off. She flopped over on to the other wing! All stability gone! Pip pushed her nose down. Yes. At fifty feet. She slithered along the surface of the water. We grazed a cake of ice. I heard Don reporting.

Then the intercom went out. Not a word from Alec. Christ, the port engine's afire.

All of a sudden it dawned on me how I could see the port engine. The port side was opened up as though it had been ripped apart. I saw a quite small fire only a few feet away. Almost absent-mindedly I beat it out with my glove. My eyes never left the port engine.

The flames blew out and I can remember thinking, "Hooray, we're saved." Saved! With the old girl only partly under control, the port engine sure to conk out soon, a hole in the airframe such that the open work was bigger than the closed portion. Saved!

We slithered along a few feet above the water and in a few miles we'd have to climb out of the end of the fiord. No room to turn. Just lift her to five thousand, Pip . . . Thanks, Pip.

I made my tour of inspection. Alec was alive but he'd have to rely on hand rotation for his guns. He said they were very stiff. Don was all right, he said, but in the same boat as Alec and the radio was distributed over most of the aircraft.

I reported all this but Pip only grunted. He was trying for altitude and I was just being tiresome. The old girl didn't want to climb. Bomb doors open . . . wheels down . . . would you?

Still, we made it. Although I did think that we might have collected a sample of the beautiful scenery as the wheels grazed it.

And now to get home.

Wait a minute! Where are the rest? I can't see anyone.

Homeward bound. High enough to turn but still below the crests. Sneak through the first gap to avoid passing down

that fatal fiord again. Is that something burning on the water? It is. And it's too small for a ship.

How long will the port engine run? What ground speed are we making? This parody of an aircraft can't hold together much longer. The port engine is running so roughly it's working the old girl apart. Half my nav. gear is somewhere in the fiord. So let's set a course for home, just as though we expected to get there.

And now it's Pip's pigeon. The long fight for altitude.

In theory a Wimpy will maintain altitude on one engine but not on an engine as beaten up as both ours were. So out goes everything while they still run. Anything which could be spared. We will have surplus petrol when the port engine conks out but the controls are all to hell and Pip doubts if he can dump any.

So now we sit and watch the port engine! How long?

After an eternity of watching it does fail. A series of coughs. Almost apologetic. But at the first cough Pip had started to feather the fan. She feathers. And *that* postpones things a little.

One engine won't keep us airborne. Think of the damage! Pip orders us to dunking stations. Prepare to ditch. He'll hold on as long as he can but he'll ditch while he still has some control. Pip has ditched once before, so he knows the drill. I take a quick look at the dinghy. Is it punctured?

Pip warns us that she'll go under very quickly, all opened up as she is. I have to relay him and get Alec out. So that was why the guns were so stiff. Poor Alec.

My imagination runs away with me again. I remember all too clearly Pip's account of his previous ditching, nose up, little as possible on the clock.

A hell of a crash as we hit. Pip had picked it well. How he told sea from sky in time to ride that roller. We're all shaken but make for the escape opening like one man, and dear God, the force of the impact with the sea has compressed it a bit. For one horrible moment we wonder if we're going to get out. But we do. What a squeeze! We stand on the tail plane. It's a rotten gray half light. Where's Pip? The old girl rises and falls in a soggy manner and is obviously not going to last two minutes. Where's Pip?

A whistle? Pip! He has the dinghy out. It dodges around all over the show as he tries to bring it closer to us. It's not like Pip to be so clumsy. Then I see he has Alec. He had his thumb in Alec's mouth and was towing him the way you gill a trout. We are up to our necks now.

We balance the dinghy carefully to get Alec in and I notice the leak. My glove stops it, and how did I come still to have a glove? Alec is rolled in. The rest of us one by one with careful ballasting. Pip last because he's heaviest. As soon as we count noses we start to bale. Fortunately my leak is the only one.

Soaked to the skin. Little spicules of ice on the water. Dope for Alec. Sleep for us all. True! We went to sleep. Horrible uneasy sleep. We wake to bale and to shift position when our cramped positions become unbearable. We then shift to another, equally unbearable one. Careful though. In this sea we could easily overturn.

Later we take stock of our advantages. We have a little water all round and I remember the pigeons. Dear Lord, the pigeons. Now at the bottom of the North Sea. Not so, said Pip, I released them. We all feel as good as picked up. The trouble is that the sea is rising and we're scarcely visible in

the troughs. Here's hoping we're on a crest when they arrive.

On the second day a Beaufighter spotted us. What's he doing so far north? He dropped a flare and headed west. Presently a matronly old flying boat comes along but the sea has risen and all she can do is to drop us another dinghy which we can't reach. Lovely! But she does circle for hours and that's very comforting because that means a surface craft.

So it does. Navy. Fleet auxiliary, I suppose, as I drop off to sleep, but they won't let me go to sleep. They have radio instructions and they know what to do. I am told that I have severe frostbite and I shall be lucky to keep all the outlying portions if I don't do as I'm told. Strange! Of course! The old girl was wide open to all the winds of heaven and we've been soaking wet for a couple of days. Now, tell me, why didn't I feel cold in the aircraft?

They put me through the treatment for ditched aircrew and talk of exposure. I suppose the others are getting the treatment too. Drowsily I don't care.

Then the feeling starts to come back. It's like the fires of hell, I tell you. Every little cell is in agony. Like the fires of hell. What have I said? Don't listen to me! I shouldn't talk about fires of hell. Not now!

36

THE friends a man makes. Does Pip seem an odd friend to make? I mean, for *me* to make. Anyone can understand any-

one else choosing Geoff. I believe the Yanks have a method for measuring who is popular and who is odd man out. I suppose they call it the index of gregariousness and I'll bet they go through anything to improve their ratings.

It seems to me that the best friendships are those between two men who have no other friends. Forsaking all others. Oh yes, I know it's sometimes homosexuality, but I'm not on that very interesting topic. Remind me of it some time.

Consider Alec and Jim. If ever there was a Cockney city sparrow it was Alec. Jim farmed somewhere in the Yorkshire dales. Few men could say nothing more eloquently. Even his pipe was in character. Short, so as to be under his eye. For good measure he always filled it slowly.

He was stocky. "Rear gunner sawn-off." But, my word, he was thick through the chest. I think the only time he ever left his dales was to join the Air Force, and why the Air Force?

Yet when Alec appeared on the scene a frugal smile, a north-country smile, creased his face and then was economically erased. Enter Alec. Talking. They sat together. Alec talking. Jim's conservative soul revolted at every syllable I'm sure but he nodded from time to time. And he listened too. Closely. But he didn't feel called upon for comment, presuming an interval to occur.

And you'd have noticed that Jim sought out Alec perhaps a little more than vice versa. And yet, I don't know. Just two men sitting together.

They had bludgeoned their ways into their present happy positions of living in each other's pockets. Tomorrow could wait. Both were unmarried, a little older than the rest of us and both were sweet gunners. Alec the better of the two.

His reflexes were faster. But Jim was solid. He settled into his turret like a broody hen. Contentedly.

In the turret there's hardly room for a deep breath or a string of obscenities. The cramping effect on, say, a run to northern Italy is unbelievable. Yet Jim made himself at home with a contented sigh.

Alec always raised hell about his dog's life but he, too, turned round in precisely the same broody-hen way and settled himself to "sit it out" as he used to say.

They once spent a leave, each in the other's bailiwick, and returned suitably chastened by the experience. Alec told me a thing or two about life in the fells. "The silence makes your eardrums rattle. The only living thing is the grass."

What Jim thought of London he confided to his pipe. Probably one dark night in bed.

You should have seen them at ground to air and vice versa. Both lovely to watch. But it was in air to air with the cameras that they were little dreams. You can teach a gunner up to a point. After that he has it or he hasn't.

Alec and Jim led the target in such a finished way; it made me remember gray mornings in a *maimai* near Lake Ellesmere, waiting for ducks. My shooting companion led the cross-flying birds in a way that was an education to watch — one moment the whistle of wings and the next the retriever bringing in the birds. Alec and Jim were like that. Except that not only was their target moving very rapidly and probably taking intelligent evasive action, but their own gun platform was probably doing the same. Besides which the only penalty for missing a duck is missing a duck.

Alec was very keen on a "bit of skirt," with or without skirt. Jim preferred his pipe. With or without tobacco.

They'd have liked to fly together but neither could bring himself to learn front gunner ju-ju so they had to be content to fly almost, but not quite, in sight of each other.

Of course a rear gunner is practically written off from the time he climbs into his turret; still it was strange that Jim went first.

I heard Alec yelling the foulest obscenities. He was trying to cover a straggler. We throttled back all we dared but he just couldn't keep station. And the fighters gathered in a leisurely fashion for the kill. Why should they hurry? Too crippled for evasive action. A sitting duck. They were very interested to see if our solicitude could be turned against us.

I heard Alec open up at extreme range without asking permission. He was yelling in a way to curdle your blood. Why, I wonder. The best tail gunner in the Air Force was throwing his ammo away and he knew it. That cramped little turret was his private hell. The essence of hell is not to be able to do anything about it. He sobbed and cursed and screamed. And then I heard him praying. "Please God, all the brollies out. Please God, please . . . and if there's only one brolly—Jim's, Jim's. . . ."

As you'd expect, there were no brollies.

37

WHEN all this is over there'll be no excuse for not knowing how it wasn't. The important thing being of course how it looked to the fellow at the time.

When I put this to Pip he shrugged and said "War's war," but his eyes looked like a lost spaniel. All the iron out of them for a moment. It came up again at that wonderful all New Zealand party I told you about. There was a middle-aged brown job there and this is his story.

"Greece wasn't so bad really. Not for a start. There was movement. First we moved up through places whose names one's heard for a moment and there's a silence. A silence while Thermopylae and Salamis suddenly fill the mind. Then Fritz hit us. He gave us everything in the book. And it was a new book. You fellows ever been dive-bombed? No? You can tell me if you like that a dive bomber is a sitting duck to you. *We* were sitting ducks to *him*. We dug in properly but small-arms fire didn't worry him very much. Why should it?

"I suppose it was the noise. Those screaming bombs. All we'd been told said we were safe dug in as we were. Yet every instinct was to run. A bomb wouldn't account for more than one or two. We just had to wait and we'd know who were that one or two. Just wait. And every next time the same.

"A clear pitiless sky too. The landscape the same. Stark to the sky. Dig in among the rocks. Then wait. Wait for the attack. Wait for night.

"Cloudless days as we dug in each morning. Starry nights as we worked our way south. Most organization gone. Just the little tight unit of your friends. Hunted among the rocks.

"The hills ran down to the sea in steep bluffs. Here and there were little bays, some of them with lovely beaches. So like New Zealand. In every bay we looked for the Navy. Sometimes it was there. Sometimes not. Always there were too many of us.

"How we prayed for just one foggy day. That would give us thirty-six hours. Enough time at least to try to throw them off the scent. So we thought. Yet the first time this miracle happened I managed to lose my unit. Believe me or not I was rather glad of it. A man alone is no target for aircraft or indeed for anyone. Besides, I thought enough of my own abilities to fancy my chance on my own.

"Then it struck me like a blow that I didn't really know a word of Greek. I suddenly felt afraid of everything about me. It was so different from when the dive bombers were at us. It wasn't only that the next turn of the path might be the last I'd ever turn. Nor that whoever saw me might very well give me away. You see, I knew Fritz was ahead of me as well as behind. I was the filling in his sandwich.

"I was weakening too. Not enough rest or food. Then the littlest thing cooked my goose. My boots were pretty far gone, so I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when my left foot let me down. I remember it was a very small stone and the pain in my foot was out of all proportion to the little twist it had had. I got my boot off and looked at my foot. It looked much the same as usual, but putting it to the ground was very painful. The march to the Peloponnesus was off.

"I hobbled a little at a time. I was trapped by my foot. It was only time now until I was in the cage. I was so dulled I was almost reconciled to it. The only thing that worried me was whether they'd try to march me to the stalag. And what they'd do to me if I couldn't make it.

"The girl in the tree knew nothing of this. I wonder if she saw me as any different from any other soldier of either side. I guess the Greeks just had to know. Anyway, up into the loft affair I went. You know how Greek houses have that

sort of space under the roof. Now if I had been Fritz I would have searched up there first, wouldn't you? But my leg didn't hurt so much lying down. There was plenty of time to think. Of course I'd have liked to bathe my foot with cold water but water was much too precious for that. So I stuck it up in the air and tried to think out the next move.

"And, damn it all, Fritz fairly streamed by. I loosened one stone and angled it on another and could see through the crack. Some of them even had bikes. Bikes on those goat tracks. Bet they carried the bikes farther than the bikes carried them.

"I tried to find out where I was; where the British were; if the Navy put in anywhere; not a chance. Nobody knew a thing. I wonder now whether they did or not. But they fed me and they didn't give me away. So far as I could make out they were offering me clothes for my getaway. What a fool I'd be to be picked up, without a word of Greek, in civvies. So I stuck to my uniform, although only a clairvoyant would think it a uniform any more.

"Then Jerry picked me up and put me in the bag. As simple as that. A little group of them came round the corner. You know what Greek tracks are like. I was a goat to stop even for a minute just round a corner. The only place to stop is where you have a clear view in every direction. They came round the corner. A cheerful little group of youngsters in those neat and practical uniforms. They unslung their submachine guns, still smiling, and I knew that any one of them might do me in, in a pleasant offhand sort of way. But they didn't. Just gestured me to get going back down the track. My back tingled all the time but I soon came to their security bunch. Someone spoke to me. It wasn't

German so I suppose it was Greek. Then, suddenly, English rattled all around me. I had been told that every Jerry unit had someone who spoke Greek and English. I didn't believe it at the time but there they were all right. They gave me a drink and some of their iron rations. We used to hear that they had a chemical drug in soya-bean flour for their iron rations and it was supposed to perform miracles, but it tasted like sawdust. Just like ours. No miracles either. Just food.

"Then they started on me. Questions. Casual as you please. I told them exactly what I was required to do. Not a word more. So they asked me questions about England and about New Zealand. Wasn't that neat? Only Fritz would be bright enough to have such shrewd intelligence blokes so close up. Neat, all right.

"So I marched north under a skeleton guard. In the bag. They were pretty decent. Oldish fellows. I lagged a bit because of my foot. Nobody worried. How's that for confidence? So I lagged a bit more. I was getting confident too. My foot felt a lot better already.

"No sense in making a break at night, though. That was the time they were on their toes. I made it right in the middle of the day. We were skirting a bluff above a little bay. I just slipped into a little crack, after lagging as usual. I doubt if they missed me until night. As easy as that.

"I had enough sense to hole up for a while and then I haunted the beach. No boats. No Navy. No shellfish.

"I ate a kind of seaweed. Very rubbery to chew when you're weak. Slightly sweet though and very filling. I looked round for a log but anything burnable is precious in this treeless country. But I did find bits and pieces here and

there. Tied them together with strips of what was left of my shirt. Then, one night, I took the lot down to the sea and hitched myself underneath so that my face would float clear no matter what happened to the rest of me. Quite a job that. I nearly drowned myself before I got it right. You should try it some time. The water was warm though. A bit of luck that.

"When the light came it played hell with my eyes. Reflections from the water, I suppose. And sea birds were too interested by far. I shudder when I think of that now.

"That's how it was when the Navy picked me up. It took them a week to get back to Egypt so I was able to walk ashore. I imagine everyone thought me mad. I just bent down and patted the deck with my hand. It must have looked stupid."

38

So Pip is gone. "Missing, believed killed."

Of course there's always hope. Cling to it even after reason has done its worst.

I should never have gone on that leave. I should never have let him go anywhere on a shaky do without me. Just keep hoping.

He was missing once before and spent days in a dinghy, and in the days of primitive dinghies at that. Nowadays the dinghy inflates itself, pops out of its stowage space and floats alongside the aircraft. It contains everything the well-ditched aircrew can desire and everything possible is done to

combat exposure, thirst, hunger, exhaustion and even boredom. They have a tiny radio, mirrors for signaling, whistles, yellow caps, fluorescein to color the water and . . . why the hell do I spend days thinking about dinghies?

It's because it's the only chance. If Pip's alive he's in the drink. Alive, and on land, he'd have reported by now or we'd have heard he's a prisoner. He simply must be in the drink. Must!

I studied charts I already knew by heart, currents that were as familiar as the palm of my hand because I always have the drink in mind. If I'm ever in a dinghy again, I'm ready for it. I considered winds that no Met O. ever knew. But always, and desperately, I wanted to cling to the idea that Pip was alive. All right! All right! I know all about the proverbs. All men must die, it's part of the price we pay for our nervous system, but Pip need not die young. Not Pip. Oh yes, war's like that and the best run out of luck first, but the losses are bearable until they happen to be Pip. I realized, belatedly, how important he was to me. Now, lying here, I have time to discover that all my life I've leaned on someone. I haven't the guts to stand alone. Once it was you, another time, Pip. Now I'm veering back to you. If I weren't a scientist I'd take a chance that the parsons know what they're talking about and go for religion: lean on that. But I can't. This business of leaning isn't from any lack of confidence in myself; there's something else. What is it? Do you know?

A few weeks later I'd become used to the mess without Pip but I doubted if I'd ever get on so well with any other captain. I was dead lucky when Geoff came along. Pip, then Geoff. My luck was certainly in.

Geoff was a queer fish. He'd been in the Battle of France

in Fairey Battles, known as fighter-bombers because those who had the misfortune to have to use them as fighters thought they were bombers, and vice versa. Both parties were wrong. Not that being in the Battle of France or in Fairey Battles makes a man a queer fish. Geoff was a queer fish long before he was in either. A sort of natural queer fish. His shy smile was very pleasant and his hair made him look almost Norwegian, but what set him apart was his passion for perfection if the end served was to affect the future world he talked so much about. In some ways he reminds me of you: younger, less cynical, head in the clouds, feet on the ground. Like us, the war was made for him too. It enabled him to discover a lot of things, and a lot of people, but mostly it enabled him to discover Geoff. He was the first Englishman I'd ever had much to do with in the way of discussion. But all that came later.

In the days of the "phony war" it had been too easy. I used to listen in a sort of daze. What an odd world it was before the blitz! It was simply a case of landing at the nearest convenient French airfield: engine trouble, of course, and listening to the delighted exclamations of "*ces braves Anglais*" as one was led away to sundry glasses. After that, all that really mattered was not to get one's airdromes mixed as the warmth of the welcome varied inversely with the frequency of the accident. What a war! And why wasn't I here to cash in on it?

Apparently no one knew what we were to do if we advanced or the Hun did. And no one cared.

When the breakthrough came Geoff showed up at Dunkirk as did all of whatever Air Force we could raise. He went into the drink, was rescued and dragged back to shore by the

Army and then took his turn with them waiting on the beaches. He has never lost a rather shy admiration for the Army and Navy. This sets him somewhat apart from the rest of us.

You know the bitter jibe that the initials of the British Expeditionary Force stand for Back Every Fortnight. With France and Norway in mind there might appear to be something in that. But Geoff felt differently and he'd actually seen something. He had one supporter too. A bloke who'd been in the Greek and Crete messes and whose views on brave men and incompetent leaders were entitled to respect. In his opinion the Army was no better led than the Air Force, an opinion we found difficult to stomach, however entitled to respect. The point he made to Geoff was that Britain had won all her previous wars because those appointed to command were too unintelligent to have any effect either way. In other words, we had won what can be done by courage without leadership; our opponents suffering from leaders as incompetent as ours but without our saving grace of indolence.

The fellow out of the Cretan affair also conducted an inquiry into the Air Force share in the mess. He told Geoff that, if it was good enough for the brown jobs to stick it out and die where they stood, the Air Force need not have fled quite so precipitately.

See how folk unbend with Geoff? Yet it was all outside stuff. By his nature Geoff was barred from the quick communion of such as Pip.

Don't worry about what I've said about the Air Force. There'll always be jealousy between the services. The Air Force, being the youngest and hence the most anxious to as-

sert itself, howls much too shrilly, of course. And when assessing courage, it's one thing to come back home to a pleasant mess at the end of the job, and a quite different thing to stick it out, half starved, disease ridden, lost and forgotten, with equipment that can be captured, rotting in some tropical jungle. Don't sell the Army short, as the Americans say. "Infantry is the arm, which in the end, wins battles," says their training manual. It may or may not be true, but belief in it will work wonders.

How did all this happen when I set out to tell you about Geoff? Somehow Geoff opens up so many things worth thinking about. And Don never says a word about him. Neither do I. Not now.

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"EVER seen so much of it?" asked Geoff as we stopped at the door of the briefing room. "Never," said I.

The Stationmaster was looking very subdued, as well he might in the presence of all that broad braid and gold lace. Geoff closed his eyes for a moment to accustom them to the magnificence and then groped his way to a seat. I don't think that met with unqualified approval in the highest quarters.

I sometimes wonder what all these deputy directors thought of us. On the occasions they came slumming to operational stations, I mean.

Anyway, we were honored with the full works. The propaganda boys were there in force. All the rest were experts in something or other. There was all the usual hoo-ha. You know. The aims and objects of war in general and of this one in particular. The moral significance of righteousness, etc. (What does Fritz tell his bunch?) They all had the pleasantest voices. Somehow, though they talked of war, all the messy business of blood and guts and fire seemed a long way away as they talked, so I felt a little annoyed when someone produced a brand-new map, clean, too. Gnomonic projection and as far down as the Mediterranean.

There was a preliminary solemnity about respecting the rights of neutrals, then the same bloke produced a handsome map of northern Italy. Geoff grinned and whispered "*Mi sento meglio.*"

"Meaning, you snob?" said I.

Geoff smiled an apology and whispered again "I feel better," but I was damned if I could see why. Meanwhile the pleasant voices went on, just like that.

The general idea was, it appeared to wake the Ities up a bit and to remind them that war is distressingly two-sided. There had been rumors that Musso had petitioned Adolf to allow his gallant airmen to join in the bombing of London. I'll bet *that* worried the Fuehrer more than a little. Anyway, it's all his own fault and a man must put up with the allies who fasten themselves on him. Wasn't it Napoleon who said that if the Italians were hostile it took a division to defeat them; if they were neutral it took two divisions to watch them; and if they were allies it took ten divisions to rescue them. Adolf can learn from Boney. If and when we win this war I wonder if we'll put the Ities back on their feet just because the Itie vote is so important in the U.S.

During this time an officer minus gold braid is, like a good child, obscene but not heard, but Geoff said, out loud, "There's an element of low comedy in this." After the propaganda boys had considered what he might mean, and finally dismissed him as the kind of eccentric occasionally found on operational stations, the show got under way again.

"Fiat works," whispered Geoff.

However, it wasn't quite that way. Although everyone agreed that the Fiat works would be A Good Thing, we'd all be satisfied with a little general excitement in northern Italy. Especially if it brought repercussions in North Africa.

Then the question of preliminary training was thrashed out and all the variables carefully examined by minor, but strangely competent blokes. It was a pleasure to hear such detailed sense. Although I noted with some regret a distinct weakness in their vowels.

"You know," I said as we walked away, "I've never been to Italy and I've always wanted to go."

As only Geoff had ever been there there was a not unpleasant tourist feeling about the whole show. I had a hell of a lot of unsolicited advice on the route. The consensus was in favor of a loop round Vichy France, along the Côte d'Azur, the Italian Riviera and so home via Switzerland — the whole lot in daylight and good visibility, except the business end.

Queer what worried me. Wouldn't stay out of my mind in fact. It wasn't the distance or the unescorted flight right across Fortress Europe. After all, we'd be so high and so few that we'd be of no interest to anyone. I had no fears about the navigation. It was fatigue that worried me. It nagged at my mind.

So here we are. Everything special, even the rations. Not much frightfulness aboard — too full of petrol. Still, we had

enough. Nearly all incendiary but with just a few big bangs for variety and as a moral deterrent to firefighters. And, as far as I can see, all we have to do is to fly there and back.

We tumbled out of the truck and the shadowy bulk of the old girl looked, as usual, huge and comforting in the failing light. Geoff looked us over. I know he desperately wanted to say something which would be appropriate to the occasion, but, being English, he couldn't, so he just smiled in his pleasant shy way, but he did say to me: "Don't let me flatter myself. For a job like this they don't pick the pilots with the blue eyes." I nodded. I wouldn't let him flatter himself. Everyone knew that the only problems were navigational ones.

It's an early start for a job like this, of course. After all, it's a damned long way and there are some interesting possibilities for first-rate errors.

The old girl staggers off in her customary doubtful fashion. You know what I mean. Hold her down until the last possible moment, then gently ease her because she has such a bellyful of fuel. That belly full of petrol sticks in all our minds until she finally comes unstuck. So it should. Dangerous stuff, petrol. We climb slowly in what remains of the light in the upper atmosphere. Queer, that. I remember, once, we had two sunsets in the one evening. One on the ground, and then, as we rose we sighted the sun again, apparently rising in the west and then sinking in a most obliging manner in the same place as we steadied up on track. Silly to look at.

Anyway, tonight we had a little more light as we went higher but that soon faded. We felt reasonably secure. No one would be interested, in so few of us at our height. Obviously we meant business elsewhere so Fritz thankfully passed

us on to his neighbor's screen . . . In passing, can you think of a good device for letting an aircraft know if it is on someone's screen? I had an idea for something to pick up the outgoing pulse and record it in the way that radio location picks up the returning pulse. It'd be simple, because I don't want a map of the features of the bloke below, all I'd want to know was if he was interested enough to want to track me. Useful bit of information, that. The difference between wondering if you're detected and being sure you're not is worth all the money in the world.

At our height there's not a ground feature of any kind visible. In the dark and the cloud cover there's a lovely cozy feeling of remoteness from trouble. Even the noise of the engines has become part of the pattern. Not, of course, that "cozy" should be taken too literally, either. On a long job like this the Air Force hasn't the sense to realize that the aircrew must be protected from undue strain. The first enemy is noise . . . the unbearable racket of the engines. Unbearable. Until they become part of the all-embracing nerve sapping. Then there's cold. You'll point out that high altitude suits deal with that one. Not so. You pay for your warmth with immobility. And the inability to move freely is another of those things. Then there's the pressure of the mask on the face. You remember your idea for an oxygen-helium recirculated atmosphere? Aren't you glad to know it's only taken a couple of years to get around?

Discomfort. Then there's the restricted vision. And on really long jobs like this one there's the difficulty about eating. If ever they climb Everest I suppose they'll use your oxygen-helium idea but they'll probably feel the way we do when they try to eat. After all, we're on top of Everest now.

I'll bet they find it hard to concentrate too. Oxygen lack leads to "don't care." Not the debonair ignoring of risks; just a pettish unwillingness to do anything about them. Tempers suffer too. I'll bet that's how it will be on Everest.

Hear the way a man thinks in the little world of an aircraft, shut in by the cloud and the night and the noise. You've no idea how close the crew feel to each other. Of course the guided rocket will be developed, if not for this war for the next, and all the very real comradeship, the one redeeming feature of war, will be over. The way men feel towards each other, the warmth of unacknowledged friendship — that's very strong in aircrew. But when the rocket has finally replaced us all, when the gunner has won his final victory, I wonder if the Air Force will be kept in existence to perform symbolic duties. We British are capable of anything. Of course, the top planners should, by now, have matured plans for taking over rockets on the basis that whatever moves in the air is, *ipso facto*, Air Force. I can't see the Army being so dull as to let that one go, but it's worth a try.

And so, when we've used a bit of fuel, up to have a look at the rest of the universe. The old girl wallows with soggy controls round about her ceiling but there's still a bit of mush above us. And so down to an altitude where control is easier. Unless something is seriously wrong we're on track, making the estimated ground speed, well clear of all possible spot heights, and Switzerland is still some distance away.

I'll bet you're bored reading this. It bored me at the time and it bores me now to talk about it. Still, that's the way it was. Doubtless we were detected but chances of interception scarcely existed. So why not a little nourishment? We

never get over drinking boiling cocoa, even although we know that it's the altitude that makes it boil at a drinking temperature. And food. We get the absurdest fads, which, surprisingly, disappear when we return to lower altitudes.

All this speculation and boredom brings us over Switzerland. There's a bit of turbulence — there always is. We climb to get above it without undue guilt about the rights of neutrals. Soon we are among the cloud hills and valleys in the starlight. There's no moon. Naturally, we pick a moonless night just in case there's no cloud cover over any parts of the route. It's embarrassing though. There are too many stars to choose from. On moonlight nights the principal navigation stars are very prominent because the light of the moon blankets all the minor ones and this is all to the good. What a lovely night. No wonder poets are fascinated by night, the mystery of it and the beauty of the stars.

So here we are. Below is Switzerland. Sleep well, necessary neutrals. After all it would be quite impossible to run a war without you.

It won't be long now. Once clear of the edge of the Italian Alps we'll go downhill fast enough. With the long lead up behind us it was rather pleasant to see the Plain of Lombardy spread out in the starlight. We left the cloud cover over Switzerland and the clear Italian skies were probably as the poets describe them.

Down below was a real genuine Italian gray-out. You know, patches of darkness entirely surrounded by carelessness. And no undue perturbation either. Doubtless Fritz had dismissed us from his thoughts when we passed over into neutral Switzerland. Or perhaps he alerted Austria. Geoff said afterwards that he had probably also alerted northern

Italy and what we saw was preparedness à l'*Italien*. He opined that a steady stream of data had been pouring in to Control, North Italy, for hours past and that, tomorrow, some orderly or other would search the wastepaper baskets and burn the stuff to avoid any ill-judged inquiries. In fact, we were there expressly to save that orderly that trouble.

And so to be a little choosy. Do you know the autostrada that runs from Milano to Torino? No? Neither do I. I'm just reading from the map but Geoff says it's packed solid on both sides with advertisements. Be that as it may, we were able to line up on it to perfection. True. And no one interested in us. And after all the long way we'd come too.

The business of the early A.M. didn't take long. We opened up the formation to get maximum coverage of the target area and then did our little setpiece. The incendiaries dropped in without undue fuss or interest. But the first bangs attracted attention, all right. I wonder what they thought they were? Earthquake, perhaps? Strangely enough, the whole city lit up for a moment. Streets were outlined and all the rest of the city was clearly visible. Don't ask me what or why. Perhaps all hands just turned on lights and lifted blinds or shutters just to look-see. Ities are like that. Whatever it was, it was strange. It made me regret bitterly that we hadn't allotted more strength to the job. As far as targets were concerned it was merely a matter of taking one's pick from all the tempting ones on offer. The whole city seemed panic-stricken, as far as one could judge from events. Fires took good hold almost at once in the strong cold wind from the Alps. In the northern portion the scattered blazes ran rapidly together to form one enormous glare. Fuel plant, most likely.

And still the absurd lights were clearly visible. It was all so unreal. No attack should be pressed home with so little effort as this one.

Then, suddenly, the anti-aircraft crowd got on to the job. Probably called from bed into the cold night air. It was time to get out, of course. We had no real margin for the return but it was very difficult to tear ourselves away, because this was the piece of cake we all dream of. And *what* a piece of cake. Even the radio location must have been duff. As for air interception, there just wasn't any. All I can think of is that the possibility of ever needing it had never occurred to anyone around Musso.

Rather dazedly we took up the return journey. After a while we became quite exuberant but there was still that lingering doubt — that unreal feeling. Anyone who'd been to, say, Hamm, just couldn't believe it. I'm not sure that I do, even now.

With light aircraft the necessary high altitude was easily maintained and coming home was easier than anyone had a right to expect. It was all too easy. Something wrong somewhere. Why, the big chiefs had thoughtfully arranged no other unpleasantness on our return track, so, although we were certainly picked up at divers places no one felt strongly enough about us to want passionately to do something about it. What a piece of cake. But was it real?

And so home. Once in the truck I was suddenly exhausted beyond belief, so that I couldn't sleep at all when eventually, I did get to bed. Which gave me ample time to think of the fires we'd left behind us.

And of the children certainly incinerated there.

I SPEND so much time getting this stuff clear in my mind. Every night and most of the day. It would serve me right if it bored you and was never read. The odd thing is that, even if you don't bother to work through it I've had a wonderful time with it. Getting to know me so to speak, but there's not as much hindsight in it as you'd think. In fact, when I'm licking something into shape, I'm right back there and what I have to say doesn't even show the changes in me and my opinions as I grew up (in three years).

What brought that to my mind was Tex. He was so called because that wasn't his name, and he hated it. He came from New England somewhere and he was sent to live with us and learn the facts of life. I don't know quite why I disliked Americans so much at this time. Anyway I was mighty rude to Tex. That made it tough for him since the great weakness of the U. S. Army Air Force was, and is, navigation.

It may have been his milk-chocolate trousers or his invariably immaculate appearance. At the time I couldn't have told you.

The pity was that he was such a fine fellow, courteous, invariably polite, even to me; highly intelligent, honest and modest. Am I laying it on a bit because I was so miserable a twerp, in retrospect? He had been briefed to regard himself as an ambassador for his country and he did his best. The others didn't like Yanks either, but his genuine good nature won them over.

It got so bad that Geoff took his courage in his hands and

asked me straight out. I was angry because I didn't know what was biting me. Finally Tex cleaned the whole thing up for himself.

He buttonholed me on an occasion I now know to have been very carefully selected. "We Americans suffer a lot," he said, "from our rash of publicity officers and morale builders and what have you, but we're not all a bunch of big-mouthed know-it-alls. I'm here to learn and it's a great disappointment . . ." He left the remark in the air and watched me. I said nothing.

". . . we must learn, and quickly. I know what's wrong with some Americans, but what's wrong with me?"

I thought for a moment and then presented my backside to him.

"If you wouldn't mind booting my arse," said I. "Good and hard."

"A pleasure," said he, and he bloody near laid me on my face. "And now that we've been formally introduced," said he, "d'ye mind if I get right down to business?" Clearly a man and a brother.

"About navigation?"

"About navigation. How do you do it? You should be dead a dozen times over. Of course, I know about your little crystal bowl."

"But you don't know about my great-grandmother's broomstick."

"Don't I? I don't live far from Salem." I like Tex.

So I told him my belief that few people are fitted by mental capacity and temperament to be navigators. A ghost of a grin told me he probably knew I'd been grounded. I in-

quired tenderly about his math and he revealed an un-American interest in theory. Good man! I trotted out the cruel one started by the U.S. publicity hounds about the bombsight which would put a bomb into a pickle barrel from 20,000 feet. But Tex didn't mind because we were on a very different footing now as Tom Hood would say.

He agreed with my theses that a man must think navigation all the time, and he must analyze his errors for his soul's good. His successes he can chalk up to God. His errors are his own.

By the time the bruises on my arse were a lovely green, I'd grown really fond of Tex. He was a pilot, but I could see he was a frustrated navigator. The radio aids were a piece of cake to him. All Americans take well to gadgetry. But radio is very vulnerable. I told him of the radio plastered all over the aircraft and of a direct hit square on the radio, and other horrors. Tex whistled softly. I waited for him to ask "And what did you do?" The splendid fellow always asked.

Through Tex I saw his country and his countrymen in a new light. He talked "logistics" and I found it exciting. We both knew that industrial potential decides wars before they begin. He talked of America's industrial strength, and it can't be interfered with. I told him of the libel that the U.S.A.A.F., when a plug is defective, swaps the engine for a new one and gives the other to the Free French. Tex was glad they didn't condemn the airframe as well.

So we talked about the stars and how to see them in daylight, and how to look at the map and see the ground, and how to look for wind, and how combinations of features tie themselves together, and now to take an "intuitive glance" at them. (How many objects can *you* intuit at a glance?) I

held forth on my pet foibles and he listened with exemplary patience. He blinked when I said I had a better method than Marc St. Hilaire but always ran up my position lines in the conventional manner as well, with the result that the position was more accurate than the calculations upon which it was ostensibly based. Tex thought a moment.

"In case?" he asked.

"In case," I said.

In the end, I even opened up my idea to get around the chronic dearth of navigators. Navigational aircraft, with up to half a dozen navigators, no bomb load. Just navigators. Oh, and top cover to see the precious cargo gets safe home. All this will have to wait on a long-range fighter, of course, but when we get round to it, God help Fritz. The Americans will bury him under matériel. At present, their navigators being what they are not, Fritz is safe enough. But when the navigator team gets established . . .

Tex invited me to his home station, and I went, even though I knew that this was the opportunity of all opportunities to settle a thing or two. Actually they were charming. As disturbed as possible about the antics of their publicity-hungry chiefs of "public relations."

When Tex left he wasn't in the class of, say, Andy but he was a first-class navigator.

And, stuffed full of what the U.S.A.A.F. wanted, they lost him on the third time out. That daylight lunacy!

He left me a special mapping pen, unaffected by change of altitude.

It is a little difficult to see, at this distance, how you can be the bastard you are widely known to be and still influence us so much. Still do. Not that we were dewy-eyed little angels either. Or was it just that you were the kind of hell hound that every man at arms would wish to be?

I've talked about you a devil of a lot. You'll be surprised to discover, one day, how many total strangers know you quite well. Disconcertingly well. Or know one aspect of you anyway. Pip's opinion was that you were made to run a big union. "One bastard sees inside the other bastards' minds." But Geoff thought you were quite possibly the frustrated reincarnation of a Renaissance Pope. I suggested, rather, a *condottiere*. Geoff merely smiled and said, "Oh, do give talent its scope."

The war was your chance. Did you know it? We did. But no one else. And you let it slip. Or did you despise the whole game?

Remember that discussion of math as beauty? Dear God, dear God. Were you trying to point the way through the mess? "Math as beauty." "Beauty as perfection." "Every man carries with him some share of the vision splendid; his share." "So few know they do." "Every man serves his ideal in his fashion . . ." "Nature is simple . . ." And we rough-necks looking inward, perhaps for the first time in our hurrying lives.

Since you're never going to be in a position to take this up

with me, not ever, I'll tell you a few things that a man tells his mask: in strictest confidence.

There is such a thing as friendship among men. Passing the love of women. There's a seal on it and the seal isn't blood. It's sealed with tension shared. Tension long past the screaming point.

Tension is felt most when there is nothing active to do. By "active" I mean employment of the body or mental work so engrossing as to shut out the world. A sudden emergency is a much easier thing to cope with. Action flares up and there's a frantic to-do for a while and everyone's busy. Would you believe me if I said that there's hardly any sense of tension in that at all?

It's the mounting certainty that does it. We were coming home from Bremen once. The sea route, naturally. It was early days and things were not as well organized as now.

Bremen is defended with fearsome efficiency. You'd not believe it if I told you of the known flak concentrations, or the U-shaped wall of fighter cover. Bremen is at the bottom of the U, at the end of a sack. And we stopped a packet. A direct hit. And no one injured. Imagine it. All as deaf as posts. Apart from the pilots, each convinced that he was the only possible survivor. And with no means of knowing otherwise once communication went to hell. The old girl all over the sky, naturally.

So I checked up on the material damage and it was frightening. A gaping hole in the fuselage. The intercom out. Bomb doors open. One leg dangling, the other gone. Petrol everywhere. The pilots fighting the old girl all the way.

Me? Oh, stumbling along with my dimmed torch, aimlessly and methodically checking as I had been taught.

Rather like a mechanical doll. No sense of urgency at all.

In the upshot it looked as though we had all better get out before we crossed the coast. The dinghy was done for. We were losing petrol too and one couldn't help thinking about the drink. It was a hell of a night for a dunking. The fans were still turning but there were chunks of cowling loose and God knows what else. On a stinking night a dimmed torch doesn't show much, and you guess the rest from the behavior of the old girl.

So it's us for the high jump.

Unless, of course, we try to make it and take the high jump at the other end. We can't get the dangling leg up so no belly landing is possible. It's abandon the ship somewhere. The trouble is — where?

You'd probably know we gave it a go to get her home. Don't ask me why. But we all knew that that was what we'd try.

A stinking night. I told you, didn't I? The old girl could hold her own at altitude but she couldn't climb. The cover above us was impenetrable. No fix there. The loop was out too. No bearings there. No sense in dropping any of our precious altitude to have a look at the sea. That wouldn't tell us much.

What happens to a compass that's had a shell explode practically on top of it?

Back-plot for your life. For all our lives. Get a point of departure. Set a course. And, by way of comedy, add an E.T.A. Then wait, just wait.

The pilots happily steer the course that little Johnny has given them.

"When we get over the home airdrome everyone will bail out. Sorry for the old girl, but there it is."

The gunners were probably thankful for all the cloud cover which relieved their minds a lot. There's always some pettishness at fighter airdromes along the homeward route. So the gunners view the cloud in a most benign way.

So the navigator sits and waits. Scans a sky in which there's no break in the cloud. It's the same on both sides and below. We're flying in a bale of wool.

The wireless op. was engaged in trying to restore his ju-ju to order. Considering that most of it was plastered in fragments all around him it seemed to me to reflect more credit on his training than on his sense. His instructions were to repair the set.

Yes. The navigator waits. Waits for hour after aching hour. Then, suddenly, there was Geoff. It was one of my earliest jobs with him. He looked at me owlishly for a moment. With the hurricane blasting through the shattered old girl, the mush all around us, the soggy wallowing that told of precarious control, Geoff found time to look in. He patted my forearm. Then he patted the old girl. He knew all right. The weight was on him too.

The second dicky knew that we were making a very reduced air speed, that the wind had swung round against us, that we were losing fuel, that the bomb doors were open and that the go-cart had gone to hell. He also knew that there was a whacking great hole somewhere. Apart from these he hadn't a care in the world. He was on course and headed for home.

At any rate, he was on course.

It would be Geoff's pigeon when the testing time came. Geoff saw the whole picture and he knew where the tension was being felt. There is such a thing as friendship among men.

Just to tidy things up. I was well out in my course but we did hit England. Well north of my reckoning. Would you believe me if I said that, subconsciously, I'd planned it that way? North of course still hits England; south puts one in the bag. Or the drink.

An hour past dawn. A gray wet morning. Much later than I had estimated too. The time between my estimate and the actual time of arrival was all eternity.

Geoff asked if I could see the wheel from the hole. I managed to sight it but what the hell he wanted its angle for beat me. He had throttled back for a while and then gave her all she'd safely take. After which fun and games I had to tell him if the leg had altered its angle. It had too. Appreciably.

"Good," said Geoff. "It's loose. Not jammed. We'll sit her down." I was thinking of Geoff. He planned to sit her down bargaining on the leg getting whipped off at first contact. Good for Geoff.

"You know where she'll break in two," said he.

"Sure," said I. "At the blasted hole."

"You're in the best position," said he. "Alec?"

I nodded. I'd get Alec.

A gray morning I said, didn't I? No fuel at all. Probably what was in the carburetors. A strange field. Some agitated work with the lamps. Signs of perturbation down below. Doubtless the crash wagon was alerted and the blood cart too.

A wide flat turn without flaps. But no tension for me any more. Over to you, Geoff.

A hell of a crash. The old girl broke in two all right. No fire. Nothing to burn? Alec in the mashed-up remains of his turret. At first I thought of the mashed-up remains of

Alec. Not so. Chiefly his legs. When the airframe went to hell his feet stuck through out into the cruel world.

A very handsome wreck, all in all. The Warrant Officer (Fire Crew) in his asbestos suit looked very hot and a little disappointed. The blood cart had picked up an M.O. en route. He was young and new. We were his first clients. The mobile crane appeared through the rain. Its long jib had a most disconcerting air. Almost obscene.

We stood and watched. The young M.O. wanted to fill us up with glucose. Shock, I suppose.

Geoff's chin had fallen right onto his chest. His fair hair dripped with rain.

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ARE you getting a little tired of hearing me whine? I hope not. Because I have a heavy cold today. You may smile a bit at that. I suppose I'm nearly broken to pieces unless I'm charred all over. I don't know. There's not much sensation in the antipodes. It's a curious feeling not to have any feeling in the outlying portions.

How do we know where our limbs are when our eyes are closed? Is there a feeling for body orientation and position in space? And how do we know that we actually possess legs in a case like mine? I've not seen them for ages. As you'll gather I've not sat up since I came here. Yet, somehow, I feel I still have my legs.

There was a gunner whose legs stuck out from the turret

when his aircraft disintegrated. Rather like Alec's. But this fellow was unlucky. They amputated both legs. All the same, he took some convincing because, like me, he couldn't sit up and he *could* still feel cramp, pins and needles, and a chilblain in his missing feet. When he was finally convinced he set his shoes up on the locker beside his bed. Whether to remind him of his vanished feet or as a token of his interest in artificial limbs I don't know. It's the insensitive ones who are "good patients" when it comes to fitting and using of the artificial limbs. New toys and a child's mind. The fellow sensitive to his body's integrity never really convinces anyone that he is trying. *My body's integrity!* Oh, Christ.

I didn't discover what happened to that gunner. I hate hospitals and all they stand for and what they indicate of man's days. Suffering, no matter to what end, hurts me so exquisitely that I have learned to avoid looking at it. I wonder if I affect anyone else like that now? Not that I am suffering at the moment. I'm not.

I didn't see that gunner again, as you'd expect. You're sensitive to these things, so you tell me something about him. He used to lie, they said, looking at those shoes. Occasionally he'd put his hands in them and make them march. He was much happier when he had socks on his hands.

My cold? If I'm as heavily drugged as I think I am what chance would a cold germ have with that battery of antiseptics and sedatives or whatever it is they use to shut parts of me off from my knowledge? How is it that I have a cold at all?

My awareness of myself is sharply bounded. My arms and hands are still with me, so is my head and my upper body. I wonder how goes the rest. They dress my back and chest.

I don't like to think of that. But they also work on me for long periods when I have no feeling of what they're at.

I've tried to get out of them something about my condition. They laugh cheerfully, the buxom bitches, and try to keep my spirits up with their incomprehensible inanities. One doesn't need to be a linguist to grasp the general tenor.

The male sex purses its lips and asks me, what, specifically, I want to know. As though I knew. What I'm really begging them to tell me is what I don't want to know. And they don't tell me anyway. It's an elaborate two-sided game of pretenses. One day someone is going to step out of his role.

My cold? Why should it depress me so? Why should it assume major importance when so many other things clamor for my attention?

I'll tell you something. We'll bury it in the middle of this letter. The direct hit shut me in.

My cold again? My nose runs. The back of my throat is on fire. No! It isn't. Nothing is on fire.

I wonder if anyone ever volunteers to work in a P.O.W. camp? Quakers perhaps. All the big camps have their own P.O.W. medical staff of course, but we're much too small. At least I think that's how it is. Everyone appears to be old. Or am I just imagining that? And everyone is so impersonally kind. Don't believe anything you hear to the contrary. Everyone is kind. I'm smothered in kindness.

There's a most comforting stuff to swallow and from time to time I get help to gargle. I have something to suck. I don't suppose the whole lot will shorten my cold's duration by an hour but it does bring people around and I don't feel so much that I'm left in a corner to die. What did I say? What I meant was that the cold medicines are no good.

They've shifted my bed two places nearer the door.

43

THERE's a queer heightened feeling about the place when a really big raid is in prospect. Of course some of us won't return, but we'll give Fritz an almighty crack and prove to someone's satisfaction that air attack isn't as puerile as the Army says (and we half believe). Besides, about those who won't come back, it'll be the other blokes. Anyway, who wants to think about that? Bad for morale!

Now the Yanks are with us, one hears a lot of nattering about rival theories of strategy. They believe in pinpoint targets attacked in daylight and they propose to take on the Luftwaffe in the process. I wish I shared their faith in their navigation.

They went to Schweinfurt just a short time ago. The U. S. Flying Fortresses are said to have had a go in broad daylight. The latrine rumor has it that they lost about a quarter of their strength, that the remainder is largely useless and that the aircrews are yelling for Mom and the Marines.

Our present official line is that we bomb an area. For preference, a working-class residential area. Lay it flat with high explosives and devastate it with fire. Saturate the defenses and obliterate the place. The workman won't have much stomach for the job if he comes home to find his family incinerated. We shall win by breaking morale as much as by material damage. But, all in all, how far are we succeeding? Fritz is tough and highly disciplined. I'll bet he's better prepared than London was for the blitz. But then, we're hitting him much harder.

All this presupposes evasion of the Luftwaffe. See the difference? We don't want to fight. We deliver much heavier loads than the Yanks, too, and from lower altitudes. The latest bombing aids permit reasonably accurate bombing through cloud too. Near enough, anyway.

All the same, the Yanks could very well be right. Our information must be very good. Every disgruntled person in the occupied countries is a potential spy for us, so we should know where to do our pinpointing. And one really good crack at a key point could shorten the war. But no bomber can take on the fighter defense — not even an aircraft as well defended as the Flying Fortress. The American plan must wait for the evolution of a long-range fighter to give top cover there and back.

Let me tell you what a big raid is like. I've been in several. Once we were first in and, another time, last out.

Take off. Rendezvous. Set course.

Have you ever thought of the difficulty of keeping several hundred aircraft in a compact group?

Over the water, gaining altitude all the time; over the blacked-out enemy countryside that looks as though it were asleep, but that's the last thing it is. We've been picked up and our course charted, probably destination estimated, and quietly and efficiently, Fritz is preparing the counterstroke.

Suddenly, with no warning, there's a yammer of guns behind us and tracers trail out their familiar patterns. A small fighter station has slipped its squadron onto Tail-End Charlie. They get him, too. He explodes in mid-air. And that is that! All of us feel as naked as eggs now he's gone and there's a certain amount of fidgety weaving. But the fighters are nearly out of fuel and ammo.

Ahead is the target. Blacked out. Silent.

Then fighters drop in from all angles, but all from above where they have been waiting. The ground control is very good. These are ordered attacks, section by section.

Two fighters come at us. One on the tail and the other broadside on.

Jesus. Which is the decoy and which is going to press the attack? Don wants Geoff to set one up for him. Alec wants the other. Geoff does neither. We'll take the damage when our own guns don't bear and we'll rely on a little cover from the other guys.

Oh, Alec, you little beauty. I can see him dropping away below us. And at that range too! What a sweet gunner!

But Don has missed his and the cannon shells rip us about. Every hit feels as if it is upon one's own body. Christ, what's that? The old girl seriously afire? As we're not yet over the target it's my duty to find the fire. Hell! The flares have ignited and the whole show's full of smoke. I dump them and scramble back to my job. Some day there'll be a proper bomb-aimer instead of my being a maid-of-all-work.

Another attack and another. But I'm too busy to notice. We turn towards the bombing run and the fighters drop away. Up come the lights! Jesus Christ! Coned!

But down Suicide Alley we go just the same! First in!

We drop our markers. The green balls look so lovely. Clusters of them. They're the aiming marks and we lay them carefully, holding course all the time. Resolution and training versus the rising panic and the urgent desire to get to hell out of it. Bombs gone and Geoff has her in fine pitch and, with throttles wide open, we aerobatic all over the sky to lose the lights. We do, too. But she comes out of it very sluggishly.

What's wrong. As if we didn't know! How serious? God, she's sluggish! Low down, almost on the rooftops. Lord! We must have dropped off twelve thousand feet!

But what worries me isn't our peril — it was only one of my worries! — as we sideslipped, yes, in a big bomber! to clear the lights, I thought I saw *two* clusters of green balls. It nags at my mind. *Two!* There must be only one. I know the cluster didn't divide. I saw it all the way. What other bloody fool has horned in, and what lunacy of mismanagement have we here? Every one of our big team will be in two minds. Oh Christ! Have I made a mess of my first big job? two!

I ask Geoff if we can pick up a little altitude and go back. Very strictly against instructions, of course, but I tell you there were *two* clusters, Geoff!

It's all we can do to control the old girl. A.A. fire when we were coned and that broadsiding fighter have mucked up the electrical equipment. Still, Geoff is puzzled too. So, most laboriously, we pick up a few thousand feet and look back.

And, God in Heaven, there are *three* clusters of green flares! **THREE**. All burning well. A bloody equilateral triangle!

Only minutes have passed. Soon the secondaries will be going in. But where? What the hell has happened?

Oh, Fritz, you cunning bastard. Of course! Two are dummies! And the secondary markers: where will the poor bemused sods put them? Their instructions cover only one set of green balls.

Let's go home and tell the I.O. I could cry with misery. All bombing creeps back from the markers, but, oh Lord, this is cunning. There should be a sort of overseer on these jobs.

Sitting up at twenty thousand correcting the bombing pattern. But then, that would only be possible on clear nights. Still our new radio aids (dare I mention them?) would put him pretty right.

Oh! Shut up and go home! Christ Almighty, THREE.

I suppose I made a bit of a song and dance about the dummies and the creep-back of the bombing pattern. Probably to forestall any hint that it might be all my fault.

Anyway, we were sent on a mighty queer mission when the next big job came off. We were exactly last. Sort of observers. A briefing all to ourselves. A long list of questions to memorize. Then observation drill. Alec with a severe caution about curbing his natural optimism.

I had a vague idea why they picked on us. Geoff is really an astonishingly good navigator, for a pilot. And we have been very lucky too. Perhaps they cast out joint horoscopes at A.M.

So off we go. Not even Tail-End Charlie. Much higher than the rest of the formation. Do they know we're there? I toy with the idea of lighting the old girl up and claiming to be a new constellation. But, as we have no bombs and are nearly at our ceiling you can see we're high enough.

I know the concentration is below. I can even imagine how all hands feel. An attack develops as we watch, and this is a long way from the target. At the distance the tracer is quite difficult to pick up but it's real enough. A warm glow shows for a moment. Ours? Or his? But it's all so far away and that is mighty comforting to a fellow of my temperament.

Suddenly below us I swear I saw a pair of fighters. They

were quite unaware of us, of course, because their ground control cannot have picked us up with the concentration between us and their radio location. Shall we do them in? It would be childishly easy. The gunners itch with the destructiveness that all good gunners share with all bad children. Do them in? And perhaps save some poor sod in the formation, and give the whole show away?

In the thin air and the cold, thinking tends to get woolly. I only hope our observation doesn't suffer.

And so to the target area. Berlin is under cloud. It generally is in the winter. I'd hate to live there. The cloud is very dense. And Fritz, the dimwit, gets cracking with all his lights. Hasn't anyone ever told him that searchlights won't pierce cloud? All he does is to give himself away by the glow on the cloud. We can see it easily. Fritz, you dumb cluck, turn off those lights!

Now we can see the concentration easily. Their black outlines show against the lighted cloud rather like the silhouettes in the shadow games we played as children. From time to time one or another is momentarily obscured, and I was idly wondering why when, all of a sudden, the concentration showed every sign of breaking up. An attack of singular skill and tenacity has been launched. I'd never seen one so completely a surprise and so successful. Every fighter seemed to make unerringly for its target and my mind reeled with thoughts of some errorless new device as inexorable as fate. The bombing appeared ragged from our height, as well it might be. But what devilish device was in use against us? Had we been sent to note it? If so, A.M. must have known of it and yet sent the force to annihilation just the same.

Frantically I try to work it out. I try to put myself in the

fighters' place. And, like a flash it came to me. Of course! Silhouettes. Fritz isn't a dumb cluck. The light on the clouds — and fighters in ambush! — the concentration between the fighters and light — like black insects traveling across a well-lighted carpet; sitting shots; for the fighters in the dark.

We stooge about as we have been instructed for the required time though it is obvious that the attack is a failure and has been beaten off with heavy loss. Then we drop down below the cloud and we take the photos as per instructions. There are one or two small fires but nothing much. We fire out photoflash and that brings the lights up again, but the flash has a delay on it and we are nowhere in its vicinity when it illuminates everything so well. In the pitiless light of millions of candlepower there's not much chance of concealment.

We head east until the fighters give us up and then turn for home on the northerly route. All as miserable as a Scotch loser.

Apparently our effort was commendable, for we were sent off on a similar job shortly afterwards. This time, the Ruhr turned on its annual night when there is no cloud or industrial haze and the whole complex was clear to view. The only trouble is to say where one town leaves off and another begins. Not that *that* worried us very much. This is a really big strike. Really big.

We were last off but we soon overtake the striking force and arrive in time to see the markers go in. The searchlights come up at once and skillfully quarter the sky. Ground control is good. The coordination between ground and air is

good too. A few of ours buy it. But this is a big job. More and more unload in the target area. Even the secondaries are difficult to pick up in the spreading fires. The whole area is a sea of flame and smoke, occasionally erupting rather like sunspots seen through a telescope. And still the incendiaries pour in and the occasional high explosive as well. Dear God, pity thy children, even if they be our enemies.

How long? Oh Lord, how long? Never had ninety minutes seemed such an eternity. We watch. We wait.

The fighters, out of fuel or ammo, are no longer about. But the really horrible thing is the lights. They wave rather aimlessly, something in the manner of the tentacles of an octopus when its brain has been bashed in as we used to do it on the rocks as children.

The fire. The aimless purposeless lights. The gradual rising of the smoke cloud. We swing into position for our photos. The smoke reflects our flash and when we turn we see the naked fire. It covers the city and it heaves and bubbles like a volcanic eruption. Now and then an explosion hurls debris almost up to us. Can anyone live in this inferno? All our bunch have gone. There are no fighters.

The guns are silent. Only the aimless lights. As we look back we see them for a long time.

44

I'LL admit I had prejudices about Yanks before I met Tex. If he hadn't bought it I'd have liked to ask him why, since

the B-17s really can fly nearly as high as their P.R.O.s say, they haven't done something about the problems of high-altitude flying. Their masks leak oxygen, they hurt the face and the heated suit they have is just like ours — bloody well useless. And when the B-17 turrets swing out they let the cold, cold atmosphere right in. Probably designed by an automobile stylist. "How come?" as Tex's Indian ancestors would say.

All this whining. Just whining. Geoff and his stout crew had been guinea pigs in this high-altitude stuff and we've had a fright. And we don't like frights.

"Bring back a photograph of this and this." You know the idea. Navigation to yards. Altitude to inches. All in lovely crystal daylight. Off with the wheels brushing away the morning dew just as the first light flushes the buildings around the field. Off with the bloody early birds. (In passing, city birds haunt airfields. All the original rural avian inhabitants have beat it to Central Africa or the North Pole. Perhaps the city sparrows like the familiar invigorating smell of petrol.)

A lovely day, my hearties. Specially laid on by the false prophets for your exclusive use. As we climb the sun pops up in a most sprightly manner. He was rising anyway but our rapid ascent brought him up more rapidly too. The aircraft looks somehow less warlike than usual, no one would say beautiful, but perhaps a little less out of keeping with the loveliness of nature.

We climb. And after that we climb. We've been using oxygen since take-off since this is a special job and everyone has to have his wits about him. Because of the oxygen everything looks mighty fine. Except that as we climb I get an at-

tack of gas in the guts. Excruciating while it lasts. I double up in agony and it's misery to try to do my job. Geoff's sorry for me and mumbles something about diet. Curse his sympathetic soul! "Try a good fart," says Alec, seizing essentials as always. "Nothing like it to clear the arse." The others don't phrase it that way but they're, well — expectant. If I can't do my job we put back. All for want of a fart.

Presently it comes, a real arse-splitter. I'm on top of my job again within a minute. I tell Geoff so, but he suggests mildly that the information is superfluous.

Still we climb. The sky looks more black than blue now. We're above even the feathery cirrus clouds and the little spicules of ice in them glitter in a most attractive way. The world below is spread out like a carpet. I kid myself I can see the curvature of the earth. The occasional cirrus drifting below merely serves to veil the broad expanse. Oh, lovely day!

Higher still. The old girl is about at her ceiling. It's true she's new and specially tuned for this job so we must be nearly as high as my altimeter incredulously indicates. Which is bloody high, my braves.

Then along comes the first faint breath of trouble. Calmly as ever, Don mentions difficulty in moving his joints. The old girl wallows with soggy controls at her ceiling and Don has "the bends." How to save him?

Then, God in Heaven! Vapor trails! And above us! Above us, I tell you. How the hell can fighters get up there without pressure cabins? I can't see them against the sun but the trails show they're there. "Run down the line of the vapor trail," I yell to Alec; "you'll see them with your slit goggles." Back comes a sort of croak from Alec. Oh God, if

I can't hear him he can't hear me. Is the intercom defective?

But trust Alec. He's spotted the situation but they're out of his range and of course the little bastards have cannon. Now Geoff, it's over to you. Your front gunner is crippled and the fighters up there must be the latest thing or they'd never get so high and there are at least three of them. Why hasn't the second dicky relieved Don? Pettishly, I clip on my portable oxygen bottle and scramble along to edge out Don. He looks bad, what I can see of him. It's the heavy, thickset guys like Don who get the bends. Not skinny fellows like Geoff and Alec and me. But wait a minute, Pip was pounds heavier than Don, he flew at the ceiling of every aircraft he was ever in, and with duff oxygen gear too, yet he never got the bends. Perhaps that's part of being Pip. Eh, Don?

Don's resolution is remarkable. It must be agony for him to move a joint. I settle in his place while Geoff circles to try to get the fighters out of the sun. There's an unreal air about the proceedings. It's too high and too lovely a morning for sudden death.

The first whumps of the cannon shells soon dispel that one. In they come, the little sods, one broadside, one on the tail. And more to follow. Why the bloody circus? Why all the protection? What has Fritz that he doesn't want to be photographed?

The broadside guy slips underneath and turns back for another pass. Geoff deftly sets him up for me but in so doing buggers up my shot at the tail bloke who has just overshot us forward. I loose off a burst but don't need to look at Don to know I've mucked it up. Curse it, deflection shooting is for gunners. Geoff should have let me have the other one.

But here he comes again and this time I think I get one or two aboard. The old girl shudders with the cannon shells but nothing vital is hit. Jesus, how I sweat.

Geoff tries to set him up for Alec but the old girl is mighty soggy on the controls and in any case we're not built to turn with fighters. All the same, Alec does some damage. His bird straightens and flies off on the level but too far away for Alec to get him.

All this time we'd forgotten there were more than two. The other fellow dropped neatly on top, right out of the sun's eye, and this time is it. The old girl begins to spin, quite slowly. There's no sense in husbanding ammo now, so we let them have it at extreme range. That keeps them off momentarily. How long? Another minute. In they come. Alec does some more damage. Not vital, just enough to make him break off. I spray the upper atmosphere, to Don's misery and reproach. Then miraculously, the undamaged guy draws off.

Can't he see we're crippled? Or is he out of fuel or ammo? Was it a trap up there and were we late? Were they up there longer than they bargained?

Slowly we spin. Not a word over the intercom. Just a strange mumble. All the same, I'll bet all hands have grabbed their "brolly bottles"—the little oxygen bottle which will keep you alive for a quarter of an hour until you reach breathable air. At least, that's the idea. But what about the frostbite? And how'll we get Don out?

The second dicky shows up. He's only been with us twice. "Can't we hear Geoff on the intercom, or won't we answer? Are we all clots? Don't we know the doors are down and the hydraulic gear has gone to hell? Come along and wind up

with the hand gear." I leave Don and crawl after him. My portable oxygen bottle bobs along with me. Lord God, how we worked! If we can get the doors up she may come out of the spin. It's a slow spin but the extra G's force me to crawl and fight my way along. If the spin quickens or tightens we'll black out. Geoff, Geoff — don't let her!

The doors take an eternity. The second dicky's on the outer, harder side and he works like a fiend. Presently he passes out. Stupidly, I stared at him. Automatically I notice that his oxygen is O.K. Why did he pass out then? Hit? In a moment or two he recovers but passes out again as soon as he tries to work. I see it now and so, very cautiously, I finish my share and edge by him to tie off the job as well as my clumsiness will permit. He recovers again in a minute or two and crawls shakily forward. The spin slowly stops and we are flying straight and level. It's only then that I notice that one fan is feathered. On the outside of the spin, thank God. That must have helped. A lovely feeling to be flying straight and level.

The sound of Alec's guns soon ends that pipe dream. Like a fool, I leap for my place and the whole aircraft slowly grays and spins around me. When I come to, seconds later, I crawl slowly to Don's place and, in spite of the urgency of the guns, I plug into the main oxygen supply at once. The whole world clears up and I can see the little bastard slipping into position again but out of range. All the same I can see him clearly and without the furry outlines of oxygen lack and there's something odd about the tips of his wings. I've never seen that shape before and so he must be new! New fighter, eh?

Jesus! What's that? A great gaping hole appears near me

and a noise like all the thunder that ever was. Through the hole I can see an outer engine go to hell. The little cloud of ice that suddenly appears could be Geoff jettisoning petrol, I suppose. And the cold! The blasting wind and the bitter, bitter cold.

Slowly the nose comes over and down, down, down we go. The speed must be terrific and I doubt whether we're stressed to take it in our damaged condition. And how do you get out of an aircraft at this speed? If we try the escape hatches the blast will pin us there. Stupidly and dully, I find myself cursing, of all people, Don and his bloody bends. I make no move to save myself or Don; the hole gapes in front of me, its jagged edges will cut us to pieces: no escape there. Stupidly, I just won't think of anything else. I put the idea of getting out away from my mind, rather petulantly, and feebly return to cursing Don and his bends.

Seconds only, I suppose, but what an eternity of time a second is. The main oxygen supply goes and I recognize, stupidly again, that Don has passed out and I feel, in some infantile way, that it serves him right. All the same, after I'd plugged myself into my portable supply, with fingers like sausages, I do the same for him. How is Alec doing? The intercom is still mumbling.

Still going down, and then, ever so slowly, we come out of it. Ever so slowly so the damaged wing won't leave us. Ever so slowly, Geoff. Oh yes, we come out of it. Not much to spare that time, Geoff. The countryside is distressingly close. However, now that we're almost on top of it I know exactly where we are and, forgetting the intercom can only mumble, I pass the news on to Geoff. His reply comes crisp and clear. Now, how do you like that?

Then it dawned on me, or at least I think it dawned on me. Up where we were there wasn't enough air to carry our voices from the vocal cords. Hence the mumbles. That's my explanation, anyway.

And now for the chastening look around, because it's my job to check on damage. The old girl, without a load, will hold her altitude on what she has according to her manufacturers, but she's been specially tuned for high-altitude stuff and she's not so good down here. Besides two engines are not intended to maintain altitude on a flying colander.

Very slowly we slip downhill. To my surprise we lose height at about the rate the land is falling away from us and so we keep the same relative distance above it. That's fine until we meet the sea which doesn't fall away.

Count your blessings. The fans are turning. The crew is intact, or is it? What a sod you are for flesh wounds, Alec. The doors are up but one wheel is down in the way it always happens, the flaps are jammed but that's not the present trouble. That'll worry Geoff at letdown (if there is a letdown). Crowning blessing — the bloody big hole is where the old girl is strong. And how wonderful to breathe without a mask that hurts the face, constricts vision; the way a mask cuts into vision has to be experienced to be believed. The biting wind still pours through that cracking big hole and God knows how many smaller ones, but my thermometer has tentatively moved back onto the scale so the temperature must be rising. My apprehension keeps me warm, anyway.

Rather ashamedly I sneak a look at Don. He must have gone through bloody hell in that dive. A sort of decompression chamber back to front. It's a wonder the gas bubbles didn't find his heart and kill him. The sweat pouring from

him is freezing around his mask. I pull the mask off and try to make him comfortable. Slowly he revives.

Still we drift downhill. Good for you, Geoff. Hold her off the carpet.

Why is nobody interested in us? We're a sitting duck. Fighter defense knows all about us. Fritz has some bloody good reason for not wanting the area photographed and he has every reason to do us in. It'll be easy too. Geoff has a little lateral control but hardly any possibility of vertical maneuver. What are you waiting for, Fritz?

By way of comfort, I do know exactly where we are. I also know our parody of a groundspeed. And I know we're on the best possible course for the nearest possible airfield. And it's a lovely, crystal-clear day.

I need hardly mention that the radio has gone to hell. It always does. The multiplying of gadgetry to compensate for the inferior man is plain folly. An aircraft has a surprisingly small vital area, and without half the junk would be mighty hard to clean up.

Bless me, here's the sea, the very abode of Britannia herself. Just a little dirty smear on the horizon but the veritable ocean nevertheless. Geoff, how far above the little wavelets can you hold the old buzzard?

But as we approach the sea the crystal air changes a little and distressing signs of thermals appear. The damned cumulus begin to gather.

The old girl is working a bit already. You can feel her coming apart. She's in no shape to take a beating from the cumulus.

Behind us the land is bright, ahead the sea is as grim as the gates of Hell. What has happened to our lovely day?

Still no fighters? Why not? Why are they letting us off the hook? They can't want us to get away.

The light fades. Somehow, the murky light makes it feel colder. Perhaps it is. The first clumsy lurch tells us the old girl doesn't like the turbulence. I don't blame her. Neither do I.

Very slowly Don flexes his arms, and then with a sort of wonder, his legs too. The nitrogen bubbles are clearing themselves and if he doesn't have a seizure we're all right.

What did I say? At this very moment the old girl drops sickeningly. I know it's only a bump but the falling seems to be going on forever as though there were no end to it and the sudden reversal seems to be driving one's guts through one's mouth. God, I feel bad. Surely not going to be airsick before we get home. I grab some of the dope we were issued as an experiment, and then force another couple on Don.

Almost, it seems, methodically, the elements proceed to batter the old girl to pieces. Quite slowly. There's plenty of time. But, little by little, she's coming apart beneath us under the savage hammering of the cumulus and it won't be long now, my friends. The second dicky is violently airsick and I get some satisfaction out of that. He's no help at all. He just stays in his place and spews straight ahead while his whole body is convulsed with great shudders. Geoff signaled to me and I fed him some of the dope, hoping frantically that I was in time because if there's one thing will make you airsick quicker than anything else it's the smell of spew and the horrible retching sounds that go with it. Perhaps you're surprised to know it can be heard?

Going back, I took a bad toss. My own fault, of course, but it shook the wits out of me for a bit, partly because it was so

near that bloody hole. Then it dawned on me that the course for a clear, cloudless, windless morning at thirty thousand feet mightn't be necessarily right for the bashing we were getting at under two thousand. The Met report was all to hell. But wait a minute, that report was for our operational height and it said nothing about conditions at sea level. Very well then, what are these conditions at sea level? Occasionally I can see the waves so I have a line on the wind. It's all over the place. Mostly upward. Lovely.

Can you keep her airborne for another couple of hours, Geoff? Geoff thinks not. But Geoff had better think again. I tell him he has no option unless he wants to ditch the flying junk heap we're in. He gets the point. He always does. So minute by aching minute we sit and ride her with Geoff. I try not to look at the altimeter every ten seconds and I try even harder not to think of the two remaining engines, tuned for high-altitude stuff and now certainly running hot at this level. Only two of them and the old girl as full of holes as a bath sponge.

Minute by minute she settles. Minute by minute we inch closer to England. Strain your eyes through the gaps. Never mind the jolts and the breaking up of the old bus. Of course she's breaking up but it's broad daylight and soon, in the gaps between the cumulus, you'll see England. So strain your eyes until they start out of your heads. Anything that doesn't alter position is England.

And so it is. We slither over the coastline and I notice for the first time how roughly the engines are running. Geoff does his stuff. He doesn't put the other leg down until the last possible moment at the first possible airfield. All at crash stations. This is it!

We could almost put a hand on the ground at this stage but from my position I couldn't even see the little field we sat down on. All I know is that the other leg did go down and that we hit with a Godawful crack, kangarooed along for a bit, dipped to one side as the leg on that side collapsed, swung in a wide circle, the wing tip touched and disintegrated, we half rolled over and then, suddenly . . . unbelievably . . . stopped!

With me still alive. With us all still alive.

The blood cart and the crash wagon made a dead heat of it.

We stood and looked at the write-off. Geoff turned to me, "And we didn't get those photographs either."

That's just what I was thinking.

45

VERY occasionally I beat up the town with Geoff. I never volunteered to provide the women. My women mightn't be in Geoff's line of country. Yet, somehow, in the pleasantest off-hand way he would jack them up. And he always seemed to know the anonymous blind date, as the Americans say, when we actually met. Like Anne, for example.

"Why! Annel!" said he. "How nice! Do you think you can manage the Antipodean for us?"

"I can manage anything that tips," said she firmly.

I looked at her carefully. It pays. Chestnut hair, a few freckles, gash of a mouth (they all have), lovely legs, a bit bony in the body.

"Think you'll remember me when next we meet?"

"Sure to; no one else I know has seventeen freckles across the bridge of the nose!"

She squinted horribly in an endeavor to check my arithmetic. That covered the gap until we got a table. Then she squinted sideways again. This time at me.

"Ho! Navigator! Do you know your way round?" The others were mildly amused. So this was an act. Let me get into it!

"Only with those one can work around."

She turned to Geoff. "Am I in bad company?"

"Dreadful," said he.

"My grandfather was a missionary," she told me, "and whenever I get in bad company I have an urgent desire to drag it down to my level. Scared?"

"Petrified, and hungry, too. When you have finished tapping the menu against your teeth, I'd like to sink mine into the table d'hôte." We ordered and danced until it was served. She danced beautifully. They all do. The music was "If I should fall in love again."

Then a taxi for four. What the hell was wrong with Geoff?

That weekend the station looked not too bad. I had leave and it was a lovely Sunday morning of early summer. I was eying it with considerable approval when Geoff (on duty, poor sod) turned up behind me. He had an ignition key dangling from his little finger. "Anne," he said giving me the key.

"You and your taxi for four," said I. "I don't even know how to get hold of her." Then I noticed the scrap of paper in the key ring.

I had my usual trial of patience with long distance and then I heard her lively voice . . .

"Hol" said I.

"Navigator," said she. "Stars in your eyes?"

"I had thought," said I, "of the charm of the countryside. My bucolic Antipodean nature needs an outlet, and I have a chariot for two."

"Petrol?" said she succinctly.

"I am on the best of terms with the sergeant of the Transport Section," I replied loftily.

"What shall I wear? Don't be dumb, tell me!"

"Oh, I was just running over in my mind what you might wear, and I was undressing and dressing you so fast I got myself confused."

"And when your confusion abates, what do I wear?"

"A print frock. Crisp. No hat."

She rang again a few moments later . . .

"Stockings?"

"Yes. You can take them off if need be."

"Oh."

A little while later, another ring.

"Sandals?"

"Sandals. Three quarters of an hour."

"Oh."

Geoff's little go-cart was cream with red upholstery. Riding in it one's backside was practically on the road and there was as much wind protection as you get on a raft.

Anne looked lovely. Crisp. A summer morning girl.

I opened the pretense of a door and she arranged herself with a delightful rustle of underwear and pretty legs. She tipped her face up to the sun to say "Lovely day. Oh, lovely

day." Considering that the wild flowers had begun to colonize the bomb wreckage opposite she may well have been right.

"Fifteen," said I.

"Good," said she. "Two gone."

"Where to?" from both of us simultaneously.

"As a bucolic Antipodean . . ."

She laughed and looked at me with the expectant air of a bird.

"Do they still grow tulips in Lincolnshire?" But, on the way, I thought about tulips. They look as though someone had cut them out of metal. Tulips! On a morning such as this. With this girl. And in this mood! So we turned southwest for Shakespeare's country.

"Tell me about the Antipodes," she said.

I told her of the forest, lime-green to the water's edge; of lakes tucked away in the midst of it as though God had planted them there for his private contemplation; of the Franz Josef glacier plunging through subtropical rain forest, ablaze with rata at Christmas, of Tane Muhata, and the glow-worm cave and the silence there; the mists rising at Milford Sound, and Te Rauparaha's march from Kawhia to Kapiti . . .

Suddenly I was aware of her hand on my sleeve. "Come back," she said gently, "you're shutting me out."

I looked at her shining eyes and alert little face. I kissed my forefinger and touched it to her freckled nose. She wrinkled the nose and blew a kiss across the heel of her hand.

"Isn't it a lovely morning to have the morning to ourselves?" I asked.

"And it's just as well we have the road to ourselves while

you go voyaging to the Ultimate Isles." This from her.

Suddenly, there was Stratford's spire sticking up out of its water meadows. It was high noon and the spire shimmered a little in the heat. We stopped on the only suitable rise.

I lifted her over a gate. I could feel her softness through her frock. I dropped her gently and vaulted the fence just to prove to myself that I could. We leaned on the gate for a moment.

" 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' " I asked.

Her face shadowed for a moment. " 'For summer's lease hath all too short a date . . . ' "

We started to walk along the ridge, but there was something awry. Then you came to my aid as you so often do in times of emergency. I wriggled my finger at her, she stared for a moment, and then we walked on, little fingers linked, unspeaking.

As we neared the crest she said "There's a group of trees in the hollow. Not enough to make a copse. But the latest wood violets in all England are there."

"*Are* there?" from me, realizing that we hadn't stopped by the accident I had thought.

"Wait here," she whispered, "and I'll see."

She left me below the crest and then returned with a child's air of mystery. "They're there!"

So we went to look at the violets. A round dozen of them. The sun was hot and the air was still. No weather for violets.

I took her hand and kissed the fingertips separately, folded them into the palm and sealed them with another on the knuckles. Her hand was firm and freckled. Childlike she offered me the other.

I picked her up, and, believe it or not, on the farther slope were bluebells. Bluebells! Weeks late!

She was lying so quietly in my arms she might have been asleep. Mightily delicately I sat down. The sun was her friend. Her chestnut hair shone and her freckles rejoiced. She turned an inquiring eyebrow on me.

"No, I shall not compare thee to a summer's day. You *are* the summer's day." I outlined her eyebrow with my forefinger and she rubbed her cheek against my palm.

I swear the air was singing. I was as scared as all hell that I'd ruin it so I stood up, took her thumb to raise her and said firmly, "Lunch!" Her mood changed like a flash.

"Oh, dear," said she, "bluebells! And on your Number One too." She was right and the cleaners couldn't get the bloody stain out either. Sitting on bluebells. Hell!

We had lunch at a little place where ration books seemed far away. Until they presented the bill when everything became crystal-clear. Anyway, we had a lovely lunch, although they left out the book of verse. Don't you like to watch a pretty girl drink cider when the dappled shade of the leaves overhead is probably as Milton puts it? The little walled garden we had to ourselves. Just the rustle of leaves and the breath of a summer's Sunday. The smell of food and cider all mixed with the smell of summer. I talked about poetry and New Zealand. I thought I might be getting my subjects mixed but no. Anne said that clearly the two weren't mixed in my mind — they were the same thing.

I offered her a cigarette. I don't smoke myself but I carry them as ammunition. She shook her head. "Not today!" Now, wasn't that flattering?

And all that golden afternoon we stopped at promising

gates and climbed over them, Or rather, I lifted her over them. We made all manner of discoveries, but mostly we discovered each other.

Which brought us back to her flat for a bite just at that near-dusk when a great city is mysterious and oddly beautiful. She changed into something businesslike and succeeded in looking as delightfully unbusinesslike as I had hoped.

I walked into the wee kitchenette and stood behind her. Then I put my arms around her and felt her breasts against my palms. She still held the tin opener. She didn't put it down but it rattled in her hand against the sink.

We stood there a long time. Neither spoke. Then I turned her round. Still not a word. She ran her hand along my cheek against the stubble and shivered a little. Why do women do that?

I bent her backward against the sink until her face was tilted upwards. She was so pale her make-up was positively startling. Her lips were parted and I imagined I could hear her breathe.

"You'll have to wait for your meal," she said, "because this won't wait."

Later, much later, she took up the interrupted meal-making. It took a long time. Occasionally she'd pick up a pot and stare at it as though seeing it for the first time. Then we'd both stare at it and then at each other. Not laughing. Just overwhelmed, and a bit sleepy.

I went down to the corner public, thinking of long slim bottles of hock, but as I walked, I knew this wasn't an occasion for hock. So I bought a heavy Burgundy and when we sat facing each other I poured it; wine like blood, strong, heavy Burgundy. I picked up her glass, kissed the brim and

passed it to her. She took it solemnly and murmured "And thereto I plight thee my troth," sipped a little and leaned across and kissed me on the mouth. Her lips tasted of wine. Wine like blood. I didn't go back to the station. It didn't occur to either of us that I should.

We used to lie in her narrow little bed. She used to pull my arm under her neck and push my hand against her naked breast. We whispered to each other about love, and us, and the nature of miracles; about tomorrow . . . and what about a cup of tea?

One night she dragged my hand around by the wrist and then bit each of the fingers in turn. "You're exciting me," she said, "and I don't belong to myself any more." I looked at her. Most girls look wrecks after a spirited session in bed. She looked lovely.

"I'm as poor as a church mouse," I began, and then I stopped because I couldn't help noticing how she was looking at me. Intense and frightened she might be wrong. She didn't say a word. Just waited. "And I'll never have half the things you need, and I live in a little country where everything is small scale, and you'll be a world's length away from this life, Anne. Oh, Anne . . ."

"Yes," she said so softly that I guessed rather than heard it.

"Anne, Anne: will you marry me, worthless as I am?"

She looked at me with an extraordinary solemnity. "I'll marry you, and try to make you happy, and bear you children, and where thou goest, I will go." I knew she was making a vow.

We lay, looking at the ceiling. She whispered "I'm so glad to be me in bed with you." Oh Anne, Anne.

Ages later — about a week — we had just listened to the news and even that didn't depress us. She sat on my knee like a child. "We're not going out, we're laying plans; plans for an all-white wedding. You have to plan well ahead if you want a white wedding frock. Fortunately, most of it is already in the family. All my relatives must be there, even the oldest and most remote; and a choir, and flowers — poor Father; it'll take a long time to organize."

Geoff was mildly interested in us. He frequently jacked up parties, primarily, I think, to observe us. It was nice of him, but actually we met every day I could get off-station. Sometimes only for two minutes. But those two minutes served until next time. Lunacy? Of course.

Then we were posted off to Scotland, back to the jobs in Norway. We wondered, at the time, why we were sent. I wondered, chiefly, when I should see Anne again. We were away for months. Our letters served us poorly.

At last! At long last!

I rang her and booked a room at the little hotel we had found for ourselves. Very discreet. Then I sat down to wait for her.

I heard her shoes coming along the corridor.

She turned her cheek for me to kiss. Her cheek! She lit a cigarette, looked at it for a moment, and then turned to me. "I'm getting married next week." I just stared . . . "He's very young . . . and he was so lonely and so frightened . . . and we . . . we got drunk . . . drunk." I opened my mouth to speak but she shook her head.

"Oh, no! I *wouldn't* do *that* to you!"

She got up and stood in the doorway. I noticed her make-up in a quite startling way. Then her stiff face twisted up and I saw she was trying for the gay smile I loved so much. In a ghastly parody of herself she said, in a brittle sort of way: "Off course, navigator!"

I listened to the indomitable clack, clack, clack, of her shoes as she walked along the corridor.

46

GEOFF'S on the verge of collapse. The M.O. looks oddly at him from time to time. He's had it. It's only a question of time and he'll be appointed to command a station somewhere or other, or else "promoted to a special appointment at the Air Ministry." Poor Geoff. He knows, too. For all I know I may be wasting my pity. I may be in the same boat myself, or a worse one.

I wonder if that's why we were sent to do this short tour stooging round over the sea to the poorly defended Norwegian coast? Of course, parts of it are sticky enough, but by and large Norway's a piece of cake.

We're farther north than I've been based since my operational training days. There's never been a more peaceful routine. We keep office hours. All the work is done in daylight and daylight lasts forever in the summer up here. Besides the jobs we get don't seem to matter much anyway.

We leave in the early mornings, all the freshness of the

breaking day about us, climb on track into the growing light, cross the coast always at the same spot and there, below, is the same peaceful sea: our sea. Lovely!

The checkerboard that is rural England even as far north as this gradually foreshortens and falls away behind us. The rugged coastline sinks lower and lower until it is only a white line on the horizon and indistinguishable from sea and sky. The rising sun is on our faces. Inside it soon gets damned hot.

Once course is set there's nothing to do but meditate on the clarity, or otherwise, of the air, the form of the clouds and the wind lanes on the sea, with a mental note of the wind direction they indicate. Sometimes we'd see ships in convoy herringboning their way north. Then we'd make no delay about the recognition signal. The guns down there are hair-triggered. And I don't blame them. They get hell on the northern route to Russia.

But mostly it is one bewilderingly beautiful day after another. We all get sunburned. Apparently the ultraviolet rays come through the perspex. An empty sea, a most attractive shade of blue; not mid-ocean indigo, but a closer match for the sky. Where is the horizon, my somnolent navigator?

Nothing to do for hours. George does all that an automatic pilot can be expected to do. The pilots give up even pretending to be doing anything. Usually we eat anything that's around. In time, no doubt, we'll grow as fat as the kipper kite boys. Coastal Command needs large flying boats to accommodate its personnel. It's the contented life which makes the seat too small for the seat.

Life's so easy I don't even bother about where we are until somewhere round E.T.A. (Coast). At least, that's my line;

actually I do keep an eye on things, primarily from respect for the pelt's safety. When we do reach the coast the visual fixes are dead easy and everything in the garden is invariably lovely. We fly very high and there's hardly ever any interference. For special jobs, by contrast, we may go in at zero altitude but these are seldom.

It was interesting to watch Geoff. He grew less jumpy day by day, and the muscle of his jaw stopped twitching.

Sometimes we start later and come home in the cool of the evening, in the magic of the long northern twilight. It lasts forever at ground level and somewhat longer at the altitudes we usually fly. Perhaps I'm a more primitive guy than most but I swear I can smell rural England when we're a little way from it. Imagine coming home to a place that feels like home, looks like home, even smells like home, and is home. Can you tell from this how homesick I am? Amid the alien corn, sick for home.

Geoff's improvement continued. He began to come out of his shell a bit. We beat up the town a little together when leave came our way. He knew more ropes than I suspected existed. We had a few drinks, now and then met some girls, and had a sedately good time. Frequently we (or rather Geoff and I) were invited out for cocktails and a show. This temporary gentleman finds all that a little heady. However, the cocktails were thin (they can't get the liquor). After downing them we'd go out, all together, to dine and, perhaps dance. Or take in a show. The shows were good — very good in many cases — much better than the cabaret stuff. I must admit British cabaret humor leaves me cold, or makes me hot. I can stand hearty bawdy belly-shaking laughter, and I

can appreciate jokes one smiles at, then, and for some days after. But I'm damned if I can stomach the typically British grubby innuendo, the correct response to which is a sly snicker. In most impeccably correct accents, naturally.

Geoff's people were charming. Both of them were a little perturbed about Winston Churchill (so changeable), our alliance with Russia (the Reds mean trouble), the strikes in the coal mines (don't they know there's a war on?), our dependence on America (they think of nothing but money), the French (but what can one expect?), the young people (irresponsible, my dear).

Yet, when we were in town together, their house was my home. My guttersnipe upbringing recognized that their good manners were not, as mine were, something to assume with care, but a quite unconscious garment that went with innate goodness of heart. Sometimes they blinked a little at me, but that was all.

Geoff's sister intimidated me. She called him Geoffrey. The whole family did. I began to fear I might too, and he'd never have forgiven me.

Sister took me round. Part of her war effort perhaps. Now I know how to deal with a variety of girls culminating in my education at the hands of Marian. After all she was my kind. But little sister was different. I wouldn't go out with her unless Geoff went along.

Geoff seemed to know, in the most casual way, an extraordinary number of most beautiful girls. On a strangely impersonal plane. Now, that was something beyond my comprehension. I could understand a man taking a girl around for the charm of her conversation or from abstract admiration of her beauty, but not more than once in a while.

Little sister was also devastatingly frank. One night, as we danced, she asked me: "Do you ever wonder what Geoffrey sees in you?" The tone stung so I said dryly: "Do *you* ever wonder what *I* see in Geoff?" — the emphasis rather like pistol shots.

"Didn't mean it that way," said she. "Geoffrey says you're his sense of reality, but are you really as uninteresting as that?"

Well . . . So I told her the story of my life. Suitably cleaned up as you'd expect. How I loved it. Talking about myself, I mean. Perhaps I sharpened the early struggles a little. At the very least they lost nothing in the telling.

47

SOMETIMES, from sheer boredom I suppose, I used to go down to the New Zealand pool of aircrew. Just to look over the green newcomers.

There was a bloke there in charge of all the things that get messed up when they are moved halfway round the world. A short, oldish chap, weathered and leathery. He held his pen with convulsive effort in a curiously massive fist. Obviously no clerk. Everything that came to the pool was badly confused. He added the essential element of hopelessness. Not that such a thing ever occurred to him. He did what he was told. Or rather, he did what he thought he had been told.

I used to like to hear him talk. Always about New Zealand

and Civvy Street. How sane he sounded. He had been a bushman and could easily be provoked to talk about it.

A flat monotonous voice he had, oddly cracked, weathered, you might say. I started on the wrong foot by referring to him as a "sawmill hand." He was wryly contemptuous of a New Zealander who didn't know that a mill hand works under shelter but that a bushie drops the trees in the open, where it appears they grow. The last bit just to cut me down in size.

He'd sit and talk, his palms flat on his knees in a curiously simian way. Always in the present tense. While he talked, the green rain forest enveloped us both, and I knew his friends as well as he did, Shorty, and Bull, and Cookie. Especially Cookie.

"His name is Cook, see? And he *is* a cook. Our cook. Get it?" And then would follow that curious flat laughter. Minutes of it.

"A bushie's life is tough. Mostly it rains. Almost every day at some time or other. Sometimes all day and every day for weeks. We all get rheumatics." Here he always looked briefly at his own knuckles. "But the gang gets to be good friends. The others go down the track.

"Of course the bush gets you. The warm moistness in summer and the cold mist in winter. The smell of the earth, moist, warm and somehow alive. Snow on the leaves. A wood pigeon eating white pine berries in the autumn, the sound of axes and the scream of the saw when two good men get to it; so peaceful. And then the donkey engine rackets up and breaks it all.

"Or we fell an old man rimu or totara and it smashes all the small stuff as it comes down. I tell you, the earth does shake and rotten sticks thrown in the air come down quite a

while after. These are hand-sawing days of course. Axes and wedges and men who know how to use them."

I sat beside him and the pool of aircrew was far away. You may say that, by inciting him to neglect his duties, I added to the hopelessness. On the contrary, it was a public duty to keep him harmlessly employed. All the same the story is the same anywhere. Here is a man who could cope, a part of our own very special legend, for the bushie is indeed that.

And what in the hell was that powerful fist doing clutching a pen?

48

I SUPPOSE I should write you a chatty letter about what this place is like. As I don't know, you tell me how to do it. Why do I see no one but Don and the staff? Where are the rest of the P.O.W.s? I imagine I *am* a P.O.W. Or shall I wake up in bed in New Zealand and find there hasn't been any war at all? Am I too bloody interested in myself? Who else comes into vision except Don? Who is on either side of me? Why don't they talk? Or can't I hear? But I hear Don well enough.

What shall I put into my chatty letter? Shall I describe the bed and bedding? Why not? Let me take you on a personally conducted tour. My bed seems very high to me or else Don sits on a low stool. I think I'm a bit propped up but I'm not sure. There's a bed opposite and at least one other on each side of it but my peripheral vision is not good. The really irritating thing, though, is my difficulty in focusing on the bed directly opposite. It interests me enormously in the intervals of my getting my work ready for Don.

Or shall I write to you about food? I don't know very much about the Red Cross parcels, although Don, here, says they're what makes life worth living. I could tell him what makes life worth living — it's just the wanting to be alive. And how I want to be alive!

I gather we're not big enough to have a staff of P.O.W. medicos, but the enemy M.O.s. are all right. Old, most of them that I've seen, and I've seen a few. I must be a bit of a curiosity. That is, if I'm really here. When I'm not in this damnable pain there's a dream quality that plays hell with my orientation of myself.

One of the doctors lent me a portable phonograph and his records. Of course I can't wind it but anyone passing helps. Why do so few pass? The phonograph has the thinnest, tinniest tone — old like its owner — a tone eminently suitable for dance band numbers, but the old boy's records are all Wagner and Bach. What strange bedfellows.

How I wish I'd known Wagner earlier. I'd have had a flat and a big radio-phonograph years ago and I'd have tried the charms of music to some purpose. But Wagner is a bit earthy for my taste now. Everything is different and the austerity of Bach is more to my mind. No ambiguities about him; and nothing omitted. Why do I have to meet him so late? So very late.

49

I'VE been setting things to rights so confidently. Remaking this slop-made world, as the Navy would say — and knowing so little.

I suppose Air Ministry does have plans, may even make them. It's almost certain that Bomber Command has master plans and subplans and so on. It is doubtful if Fighter Command has any plans not directly and immediately connected with grog or women, for preference, both at once. Coastal Command bristles with long-range plans, chiefly concerned with chicken farms or keeping bees.

Quite seriously, we go off on some of the craziest jobs, but I suppose they must fit into the pattern somewhere. Something like the matter of pain and injustice in a world ruled by an all-merciful father. If we could see the overall pattern it would make sense.

Let me tell you about a job we did on the Danish coast. It was a place of no importance whatever and the job was equally of no importance as one could tell from the strength allotted to it and the perfunctory briefing. We caught the contagion. We always do. There wasn't even the pretense that we were to try out some new frightfulness. It made us rather wonder why we were sent.

I took no real pains over my work yet, dead on E.T.A., there we were. The place was easily recognizable and there were no difficulties of any kind. A complete surprise. No defense of any sort or shape. It was rather like kicking a drunk.

When we got back even the I.O.s. weren't unduly interested. We thought we were probably a dummy for something big, but nothing big came off that night. It was a very quiet night all round which was surprising considering the ideal weather. We gave it up. But we gave the situation our full attention the following night when we were sent on the identical job. How's that?

Now, going back to the same place is only a matter of saturation, but we were so few and the defense just wasn't there

anyway. What do you make of that? Back we went. I took a lot more care this time and so did everyone else. It was partly the fear that there'd be a little feeling about last night, but mostly it was plain fear. We didn't want to go back when we could see no purpose in it. If there were to be guinea pigs let them be other folk.

The line the surf makes with the dunes all along the Danish coast showed up according to plan and time. It was a lovely night. Moon on the water and just sufficient ripples to make sweeping patterns of the light. Did you ever come across a poem in which there is a line about "waves struck silver by the moon"? That's how it was and the featureless coast merely heightened the effect. I didn't want to go to war with anyone.

The little town lay below. Last night's fire had all been put out and it looked peaceful enough. What remained habitable was now sheltering a lot more folk than usual but, as before, the surprise was complete. When I spoke to them afterwards everyone said that they wished that they had not been on the job. It wasn't really a piece of cake. Not at all. There was something seriously and fundamentally wrong about the whole business. We all felt, in some strange way, ashamed.

No doubt there was some very important reason why so few of us went twice to the same little place. No doubt there was some compelling reason why we had to go twice.

I'd never kicked a drunk. I'd never punched a baby. Not till that night.

SHOULD I mention "Gee"? I wonder if it's still on the secret list? I am mighty careful what I write to you for fear some chuckleheaded guy will confiscate it all on the grounds of security. I'm not very surprised if it's still on the secret list. We usually remove things from the secret list about five years after Fritz has been using them against us. Gee is intended for the dumb cluck who can't make things out for himself but it's much more than that really. Don't listen to my carping. I'm an antediluvian pre-flood survivor. A relic of the days when, in small formations, every self-respecting aircraft looked after itself. We didn't have radio devices like Gee to do our navigation for us. But then, we made a lot of blacks that wouldn't have happened with Gee. When the crew is dog-tired at the end of a long flight that's when first-rate errors occur. Gee doesn't get tired.

Still, they were great days when we relied on what we'd been taught and our own capacities. It's different now, of course. When you have a thousand bombers over one place and must get the whole show over in, say, an hour and a half, it's obvious you must lay down radio beams for guidance, but that only puts you in the neighborhood of where you want to go. Someone has to hit it fair on the nose. That's my job.

We go in as three waves; the first to locate the place and mark it with flares and incendiaries; the next bunch lay great stacks of marker incendiaries and then the third bunch really does the work. The target is, in theory, unmistakable by then; so in go the high explosives and more incendiaries.

But Fritz is a dab at laying false fires and dummy targets to mislead ingenuous bombers, so we don't always have it our way. It wasn't that way when all of us went to Essen last April but everything ran to plan when the target was Cologne a month later. "The Thousand Bomber Raid." Dear Lord. I wonder why they dredged up trainers and nonoperational aircraft to make up the magic "thousand." And drop a mere two tons of bombs apiece! We lost about fifty aircraft and that's too many for one night. It's the crews we can't replace. Every replacement is inferior to the crew it replaces.

All the same the planning for Cologne was most impressive, especially as we were sent to Essen in the same strength the following night. I suppose Air Ministry, with a rush of brains to the head, decided on another bash while all the aircraft were assembled. Anyway, we lost another forty-odd and we didn't accomplish much. The weather was against us, for one thing, and for another the Rhineland haze was all on the side of the opposition. Somehow, things were different when small numbers went off on real personal jobs. I wasn't here for the Battle of France but that must have been the high-water mark of the private and personal war. To hell with area bombing and "morale" bombing. In both cases it's a straightout attack on the women and children to undermine the will of the men. It might, too.

Before these big do's we'd been converted to four-engined aircraft. There was no trouble in that for me. Everything the same only much better. But there was a hell of a lot of rethinking, as the Yanks say, for Geoff and Don and Fred. I wonder how Pip would have fared? No, I don't. I know Pip would have coped superbly. Pip and cope are synonymous.

In a big aircraft there's more of everybody too. Rather like living in a city or in an American aircraft. However, we "hard core" relics kept the new boys in their places. In this job there's no second dicky. Just one pilot and the navigator is relieved of bombing. A bloody good idea. Navigation is like making love to a girl — a full-time job. The new guy, the bomb-aimer, is given a few hours' instruction in piloting and in an emergency, and in theory, he brings us home for breakfast. There are more gunners too and they're better placed, but there's still no upper and lower turret central fire control. That's one great thing with the Yank aircraft.

Enough of all this. Some other time.

Did I tell you about that job at Genoa when we were practically the only aircraft that made it? Now, that was real. Just a handful of us and each aircraft quietly confident of its own resources.

But we were unlucky from the start. Fritz popped an intruder right over our airfield. In November it's quite dark before seven o'clock. Just one miserable little Focke-Wulf. How the hell wasn't he spotted? He nipped in on the first guy just at take-off. The big fellow swung left-handed off the runway and went to hell in a most finished manner. A bellyful of petrol and bombs: poor sods.

It took a little time to clear the mess and he was still burning when we went by. I was bloody glad that I couldn't see much even although the fire crew had their floodlights full on in spite of the blasted little F-W. Perhaps they knew our own single seaters had whipped over to see the little bastard. Anyway, that gave us top cover.

I wasn't really worried about the F-W. when our crowd

was above us but I couldn't help thinking that we were very often first off — especially on long jobs.

We ran down our own corridor for aircraft outward bound, but were very nearly picked up by one of our own bunch. We were dead on course so it must have been his mistake — which is a hell of a lot of consolation. An intruder always makes all hands jumpy.

Over the French coast we ran into some light flak. Nothing much. Fritz has pulled most of his A.A. stuff back to defend the key target areas. Wise guy, Fritz. You don't have to show him twice. All the same, a few spent fragments did rattle on us a bit. It would have been cruel luck if any had hit us in a vital spot. None did. Still, we were spotted.

We had been promised cloud cover for most of the route. The Met wallahs are surprisingly accurate when one considers that all the regular sources of information are cut off; which certainly makes drawing a weather map rather like drawing a horoscope.

We certainly had the cloud cover. Great heavy cumulonimbus. No show of getting above it, not with our belly full.

Most unpleasant, all round. I shouldn't be surprised if someone is airsick. I feel a bit queasy myself. The anxiety about position adds to my uneasiness. Fritz has dropped to our radio navigational beams and is very subtly and shrewdly interfering with them. Not enough to awaken suspicion — just enough to muck up all the plant for frightfulness. Lead the aircraft away from its target, confuse its route home, and drop a brace of fighters on it when convenient. Yet when returning, tired, damaged perhaps, fog everywhere; how comforting to be talked down on a strange field.

Tonight static is so bad the W. Op. can't get a bearing any-

way so we don't really know anything much. Meaning, *I* don't know where we are, except in an approximate sort of way.

Not a chance of seeing the ground for a landmark, not a hope in the world of getting up high enough for an astro fix. So I just sit.

Let's look at the situation. First, Fritz certainly knows we're about because of the flak at the French coast. It's true we altered course at once to deceive him but I doubt if he was taken in by that. Let's assume he knows our track and groundspeed. Right. Then ground control is certainly tracking us. So ground control can easily place a brace of fighters on our tail, on the same course, slightly higher, and within, say, 200 yards. As I've tried the wing-tip lights and they can't be seen from here, it follows that ground control's 200 yards might as well be 200 miles: all of which makes us feel mighty fine.

But if you look, you'll see the slow, methodical covering of the sky by the gunners. Since they can hardly see the muzzles of their own guns, there's training for you. Their orders are to cover the sky. Nobody is going to intercept us except by the purest accident and he won't get time even to get a burst in. A lovely safe feeling. Let's have something to eat.

But where are we, folks?

Captain to navigator: "How are we going?"

Me: "Fine!" Are we?

Wet and white. Like flying in a bowl of milk. If the noise seems a little less than usual, put it down to the muffling effect of the cloud. Although the old girl is being thrown all over the sky everyone except me feels fine, if a little uneasy in the guts. It's like traveling in an unpredictable lift.

Shut in. Up and down. No sense of forward motion whatever.

The W. Op. has given up the unequal struggle with the static. It bloody nearly wrecks his set, he says, but we are so lightheaded that we cheerfully tell him to try another program. See how safe we feel?

Then I noticed a queer blue light and my stomach tightened. It looked like a blue streamer, and, dear God, there were similar streamers all over the fuselage. I felt my own relief as it dawned on me that this was merely St. Elmo's fire, the stuff that used to terrify sailors in the old days of sailing ships. Oh well, the sailors haven't got that on their own. It appears first on anything pointed, so it's obviously an accumulation of static, but you try telling me that when I'm actually looking at the eerie stuff. The point discharges are blue. One can't help feeling they must be visible for miles. St. Elmo's fire looks like a giveaway, the way that vapor trails are. It's no comfort to say to oneself that it's not really visible very far and, in any case, there's no one about to see it. It's not dangerous, but, by God, it looks dangerous. We all think we look villainous in the ghostly blue light.

Presently it appears on the fans and along the leading edge. None of us had seen so much of it, not even in Hudsons over Norway. No one felt happy any more. The bloody stuff got on our nerves.

A spark among the fuel — wonder if there are any leaks? We all know there are always leaks, always leaks, always minute leaks that no one can do anything about. An aircraft "works" in every joint as it flies, just as a ship works in a seaway. Of course there are leaks. And a fat lot of good thinking of them does you.

Then, with all this static there's bound to be lightning and that's really dangerous. I keep this to myself. The crew is uneasy enough as it is. The blue light makes everything glint so evilly. So keep it to yourself. But not for long.

A hell of a crash. A.A. fire? Can't be. What the hell? We were all blinded for a moment and then we had the weirdest afterimages. Scared? Not at the moment. We all thought ourselves done for. Yet the old girl didn't even swerve even although the pilot was momentarily blind. George wasn't affected. Thank God! Thank George!

It was lightning all right. None of us thought of it at the time. Not as the explanation of the hell of a crash. Not even I who had lightning in his mind at the time.

The W. Op. reported the radio wrecked. He reported to me because the intercom was out. His eyes were staring owl-ishly and he was stone deaf. Poor sod.

So here we are, slowly getting over our fright. On course, we hope; undamaged, we hope. The radio gone. And it is so useful when we're returning, done to the world, perhaps to land on a strange field. There'll be only visual signals on our return and who will see the blasted things? Wonder what the visibility will be? If we can see the visual signals we won't have to go to an alternative field. But if England is covered with one of those picturesque November fogs, how shall we know where to go?

Put all that out of your mind, fella. Youse not home yet, brudder.

All the time Geoff had been keeping to himself the really horrible icing conditions. Windshields all glazed over and quite useless. I wonder how he felt the gunners were faring, and if they didn't know? Now, isn't it nice to think that we

can all keep our worries to ourselves? Wonderful bunch, aren't we?

Then chunks of ice hurled from the fans go whump on the airframe. Whump! Whump! Rather like direct hits. The weight of ice more than makes up for the fuel we've used, so the old girl won't climb. Can't climb. No stars tonight, navigator. We're using more fuel than we should and I'll bet it's a hell of a job keeping control with all that icing along the control surfaces. Still, that's Geoff's worry. Leave me to mine.

It's bitterly cold too. In theory we have some heat but the heating doesn't seem to work too well. The high-altitude suits we got later were still being developed at this time. That poor devil, Tail-End Charlie, suffered most. But then, he always did.

Presently Geoff looked in to see me. Strange! I'd been thinking of spot heights too. To clear Switzerland we'd need fifteen thousand feet and we haven't got fifteen thousand, and we don't look like getting fifteen thousand. But if we're dead on track we can get by with nine thousand. But if we're off track we'll be dead off track because that nine thousand will plaster us over half Switzerland. It would be much safer to return right now. I don't say that. Neither does Geoff. Bet he thought it though.

Of course we take the chance. I tell Geoff all I don't know. But if the Met wallahs are right, so are we. If not, not. We go on.

Anyway we're not to Switzerland yet. But we mighty soon will be. I make careful notes of the time we'll enter the corridor and how long we'll be in it. If the false prophets are out in their calculations that time will probably appear in our obituaries.

The time comes! The prickly hour!

Gosh! I'm some navigator. We don't even graze a mountain. But the temperature drops mighty suddenly which means they're very near. No more icing on the aircraft, though. They *must* be near.

Well, well, my friends. Having delivered you from one peril, now to dump you in another. Let's find Genoa, unless the perfidious Ities have shifted it.

Downhill, boys, and we'll soon be over the target. The shipyards should be readily visible and there'll be broken cloud. Just made for us. Geoff, my son, this is a mighty good team. Keep going downhill.

Engines throttled right back to save fuel, mixture lean as a drover's dog, and the bumps getting fewer and fewer. A bit heavier though, as we get near the edge of the cumulus, or maybe the cloud base. All hands straining their eyes for the first glimpse of the ground through the broken cloud. Our altimeter was set at take-off and if there are barometric changes it will be all to hell. If it's recording short I'd hate to hit the ground at a hundred and fifty knots with all this dangerous cargo. Keep your eyes peeled, blokes.

And damn it all, the break, when it came, was above us and the stars peeped through. Dear Lord! Just a moment and no time to grab a sextant and get even one shot before it closed in again.

Keep on downhill. E.T.A. And not a damned thing to see. Just grayness. Keep on course and keep on downhill. How long is a minute? Dear Lord, how long a minute is! It won't break above again at this level. So watch below! Watch the grayness till your eyeballs burst. Watch! Watch! Why didn't we return when we had the chance?

All that happens is that the grayness grows darker. A

darker grayness, that's all. What did I say? Hold her, Charles! Oh, Christ, hold her! Level off for God's sake!

Of course! Of course! The deeper grayness is the sea.

We claw off from it. Scarcely a wave on it. Must be fog with an offshore light breeze. That was close, wasn't it, Geoff? Geoff, you surely know how to baby an aircraft. Straight and level, please, while I think. Think straight and level.

We've overshot for sure. This is the Gulf of Genoa. The city is behind us. The land rises steeply out of the Gulf but it's behind us, too. Still, we have to go back to it. And if there's fog over the sea there's certainly fog over an industrial city such as Genoa. What to do? That's my pigeon. The pilot flies on the course I give him. The gunners cover their sky. Both parties grateful that the icing is over and they can see. What shall we do next, navigator?

I think of our alternative target and then, pettishly, I put it out of my mind. Genoa it is and Genoa it will be. The only trouble is: where is Genoa?

Genoa is under fog. Genoa is blacked out. How long have I to find it, Geoff? Twenty minutes to half an hour? Fly on a reciprocal course, while I think.

The others are quite content to let me think after all, that's what they brought me all this way to do. Tension mounts inside my head. There's a heavy hand pressing on the back of my neck.

No radio for a bearing. No good, anyway, at this distance. No astro fix. Don't be funny. Don't rely on the clouds opening and giving two first magnitude stars at right angles. That sort of thing only happens in books. Think about the wind; almost a flat calm or the fog would blow away. There should

have been a strong north wind from the Alps over the whole area. Why not? How far the fog? Thus far the calm. If the wind from the Alps is genuine we'll get a clear patch in about half an hour on this course.

How long is half an hour? How long half an hour is!

And we do see the ground. Every Itie village has a cathedral and they all have thumping big towers or spires or domes. God, that was a near one — over Geoff, not between . . . What Itie cathedral in a small town has a dome and two towers or spires? Practically every one. What a help!

O.K. Square search. Can you spare another half hour, Geoff? All right, I heard you. A quarter then?

A railway skirting a cliff beside the sea. Or was that a wisp of cloud? Risk a flare. I think so. Hard to see downward. Why doesn't someone invent shades for these blasted things so that the light goes downward? Was it the sea? Sure? Good. We'll get Genoa on one leg or the other. We're east or west of it.

We do too. I have a word with Geoff about the docks. Geoff looks at his endurance and then he looks at me. He doesn't think we've got enough fuel to get home, let alone find the docks. But we look for them, just the same. As Geoff said: "A.M. shouldn't allow two perfectionists in one aircraft."

We find them too. And give them all the stuff we've brought from England for the purpose. We were so low to keep under the cloud base that we had to climb to bomb for our own safety. That doesn't make for accuracy but the rear gunner reported large fires in the target area — they all do and that doesn't make Alex any bigger liar than his confreres. Not that Alec hasn't a lively imagination.

No point in hanging around. And who said fuel? And the whumps on the old girl aren't icing this time. You can see the greasy bursts in the cloud, but the A.A. boys are doing well in a most un-Itie way; we're not really frightened — the cloud cover which nearly did for us is now our friend.

So "Home, James."

Now I know where we are and how we got here, it's a piece of cake to set a course home. The old girl, bombs gone, more than half the fuel gone, climbs like a child's kite. And she won't use so much going home in ballast. But we're not really sure we'll make it; the actual quantity of fuel isn't a matter of opinion, it's a fact. The winds on the homeward track are the critical matters.

The cloud seems a little more broken. We get above it easily. Lovely astro fixes. But cold. Bitter, bitter cold.

We must be getting near Switzerland now. Geoff comes along to have it out with me. Endurance. If we go high we get good fixes but that northerly, if real, will play hell with our endurance. I suggest we clear Switzerland and then nip into the cloud. Geoff is doubtful, but I convince him. So, with the cold eating into our bones, we sit it out, as Alec says. We've eaten what there is and we've cleaned up all the thermos flasks, as much from boredom as from cold or need for food and drink.

Over Switzerland we have broken cloud. How do you like that? No sense in going too high when I can get my fixes in the gaps. So far, so very good.

Down into the mush again to cross France. Bumpier than before, really impressive turbulence. Lightning struck again at least twice. St. Elmo's fire. All as per outward journey. But the sense of urgency was all gone. No one gave a damn.

Fatigue accounted for a lot, and the cold and the boredom. Fred had spent nearly eight hours trying to repair his radio. He hadn't a dog's show — not with the component parts welded together by lightning — but those were his instructions. It saves him from the boredom which, by now, must be an aching tooth with the gunners.

In the cloud something suddenly gets at my peace of mind. Suppose England is under fog; looks as though it might be. We'd better get a good look at the ground over France once we're clear of the towers of Notre Dame.

The trouble is we don't see the lovely countryside of La Belle France at all. Flares simply illuminate the grayness. What endurance have we? Say, twelve to thirteen hours, base to base. At 8.30 A.M. the tanks run dry. What's the time now? And where are we?

The turbulence near ground level tells its own tale. Not fog! The cloud base is on the ground. Dear Lord, no radio! What station for us? With two good astro fixes I can put us squarely over the field, but who will talk us down? Who will ever know we're around except for the sound or the motors?

Geoff, can you spare me one more climb at 8 A.M.?

Geoff can spare me one more climb. He has no option. With no radio and the cloud down like a blanket, it's the only thing to do. So up, Geoff, to eye the rest of the universe. A lovely fix. So that's where we are! What a hell of a wind change that must have been to put us over the low land of Holland instead of similar country in the fens! I think sourly of what might have happened. We alter course for home.

At E.T.A. with enough fuel in the carburetors to fill a cigarette lighter, the cloud is as low as before, the turbulence

as bad and we're something under a hundred feet from the ground if there's been no change in barometric pressure. Obviously the radio is crackling with instructions as to alternative fields; lovely airfields with unimpaired visibility, and expecting us, if we only knew which.

Not a bloody thing to be seen, except, perhaps a poplar which went by at wing-tip level. Geoff, you're a country gentleman: was that a poplar?

Here's a pretty how-d'ye-do. No fuel, no home to go to, no idea of how to get there anyway.

The hair on the back of my neck is very sensitive to peril. Dear Lord, where is the airfield? Any airfield?

The engines are still running. On what, I wonder. Half an hour past the end of our endurance and still the fans keep turning: for how long?

Shall we try a flare? An odd idea in the middle of the morning but who has a better one? The flare heats the air in its neighborhood and the cloud lifts for a moment. What English village has a large parish church with a square tower? Dozens! What a help!

Geoff, are you thinking of taking us all to about a thousand feet and having us bale out? And have you the fuel to climb to that height? Surely someone has heard our engines and dropped to it that the radio is out! Otherwise, why no reply?

Someone had. A line of what looks like smudge pots on a frosty night in Central Otago suddenly begins to glow uncertainly in the fog and dissipates it momentarily along a runway. Slowly we turn towards salvation. One motor dies, but we have enough airspeed even if another dies. Sure enough it does.

Rumble along the runway. Stop. Taxi to dispersal. We had to get a tractor to finish the job.

And now we're here, folks, where are we?
You guessed it. That's what I mean by navigation!

51

THERE are some mighty fine fellows knocking about in the Air Force. Intelligent goes without saying. And, occasionally, of a hearteningly zany turn of mind. Intelligence and eccentricity qualify for the Cads' Club.

Did I tell you of the chapter of the Club which had an imaginary cat? True! A phantasmal feline, if you'll pardon me. An animal of great intelligence and charm but, as you'd expect, a little given to eccentricity. Moreover, the animal was a source of no small profit to the proud owners.

I made the animal's acquaintance when I dropped in, quite casually, and noticed with surprise that the president didn't have the best chair. Invitingly by the fire too.

I took it.

Immediately everyone put down books, glasses and the like. All shoulders rose in horror. Shudders shook all frames. All faces screwed up in agony. All voices said simultaneously: "The clot has sat on the animal!" Whereupon, stifling their sympathies, all went to the bar and had one on me.

I reviewed the situation as well as I could without asking questions, which would clearly have bankrupted me. Then I noticed that the barman had set up all the glasses, and a saucer of milk, with whisky. Uh-huh. A cat.

So I breasted the bar and downed mine. I said: "So it's an imaginary cat." Everyone winced, and the barman, who had

been stroking about six inches above the saucer of whisky and milk, hastened to refuel the shocked ensemble. As I signed the chit for the drinks I ran over the proceedings to date: "the clot has sat on the animal"; so *that* was it!

I turned to my neighbor. "May I pay my respects to the animal?" He nodded a little austerely. "Certainly. And I think a suitable apology." I looked along the bar. On my left a bloke was scratching a pair of imaginary ears so I addressed myself in that quarter. Just before I opened my mouth the scratching ceased and, when I spoke, everyone looked at me curiously. With a sigh the barman reached for the glasses again. What the hell?

I looked around. A bit bewildered, I don't mind admitting. And there was a bloke, way down the bar, running his cupped fingers along an imaginary tail. The bloody animal must have passed me without my noticing it! No wonder they thought me crazy! My polite apology had been addressed to the arse end of a retreating cat.

Would you believe me if I said that, for weeks, the animal obsessed me? He or she, for example? Sorry. He, of course. A male club.

The more one studied its habits the more one respected the animal. Coupled with the highest intelligence went a cavalier and original attitude to the world which I found much to my taste. The animal, however, regarded his gifts as in the general nature of catlike things. I longed to improve my acquaintance.

You've no idea of the range of his abilities. For example, he played Cardinal Huff with all comers every dining night, and he invariably won. The saucers of whisky and milk have been known to extend the full length of the bar.

What interested me most, however, was to see him cross the anteroom. He would be sitting, curled up, on someone's knee. That could be told by watching how he was being stroked. Then someone on the other side would call to him. Silently, naturally. The stroker would lift him carefully to the carpet. (There are two schools of lifters, one round the middle, the other by the scruff of the neck.) Once on the carpet you could follow his progress by the little scratches he stopped, en route, to receive. Then he'd make a well-judged leap and land on some knee or other. He'd turn round in cat fashion, make himself comfortable and then, once comfortable, he'd submit to what he enjoyed, rather like a woman.

I swear I could see his eyes close and his whiskers quiver sybaritically. The fellows all looked on and smiled. Lucky tyke.

A little later somebody would take him to the bar where his winnings awaited his attention. He would sniff among the saucers and finally settle for one. The nearest bloke would shift any in which he might step or drop his tail. Did I mention that whisky and milk was his sole diet? He despised anything solid.

Dear Lord! One guest night the M.O., anxious for his welfare and worried about his vitamin intake and the consequent state of his fur, slipped some conditioning powders into his saucers so stealthily that he deceived even that alert animal.

The barman damned nearly died. He was off duty for a fortnight, but, on his return we did notice a perceptible improvement in the condition of his hair. He did, unfortunately, bear certain scars on his personality. In moments of stress or indecision he began to mew faintly.

Then came the troubled time when the animal was kidnaped. Only the Fleet Air Arm would have the gall to kidnap an imaginary cat. And on a guest night, too.

The mess was stricken. Chaps sat around trying to read. Tempers frayed easily. Too many of us just lounged around with our hands hanging over the sides of chairs, just waiting for the familiar whiskers. Bloodcurdling sketches of his probable life in that sink of iniquity harrowed our feelings. How could the animal come, unsullied, from such an experience? If he ever did come. Perhaps, indeed, his moral fiber had been so subtly undermined that he had become a willing helot. Such thoughts, if uttered aloud, always led to rows. But most of us harbored them.

The bar takings fell off. We would have liked to drown our sorrows. But the mute saucers of whisky and milk, gathering dust, reproved us. The barman, mewing quite audibly now, used to empty the senior saucer and put out a fresh one every day. More in hope than in expectation, I imagine.

And then the cat came back!

Walked it! The game little bastard!

What a night we had that night. The animal presided over one of the finest bashes ever. One of the most lunatic binges ever. Yet there was one little contretemps. It reveals the Navy in a bad light, too. After all, the animal could not have been more than a few years old. It happened like this. The barman, in tears, was reaching for the whisky and milk when suddenly he halted irresolutely and then cocked his ear while a mounting expression of horror gradually crept over his face; mewing distractedly to himself, he put the whisky back on the shelf and reached for the bottle of rum we keep for softening leather or occasional visits from the Navy. We looked

at the animal in stricken misery. It was only momentary. The noble beast rallied all his forces and resolutely put Satan behind him. With a debonair courage we all admired he waved the rum back to that obscurity from which it should never have emerged. Purring happily, the barman restored the *status quo ante*.

Yet we were worried. A sojourn with the Fleet Air Arm could hardly have failed to have left his character and morals in need of attention. After a hell of a lot of trouble we were able to get down a psychiatrist from Air Ministry. He assured us that there was no irreparable harm apparent. Nothing which a suitable diet would not mend. Provided the patient was protected from shock, such as an unexpected sight of a child sailing a boat, for example. In his opinion, the animal had nothing to fear.

I wish we could say the same for him. I notice he is on indefinite leave. The animal said he guessed it right from the beginning of the interview, but said also, that he found such interviews tiring and begged us not to send him any more folk in need of the kind of mental guidance which only a well-adjusted cat can give.

Life took up its accustomed tenor. But our joy was tempered by our appreciation of the hardships he had endured. He'd lived for several weeks with the Navy, which corresponds to exposure to the kind of culture the anthropologists dig up in Java. And then he'd walked home. After the Navy I suppose that was a piece of cake. Hardly an ordeal at all, though tough enough at ordinary times.

The Met wallah calculated that, allowing for lifts at normal frequency, it had taken him a fortnight. And the M.O. discovered that he had worn his pads down an inch and a

quarter. Which the Met wallah agreed was reasonable for the time and the distance.

We all used to feel pity well up in us as we stroked his back an inch and a quarter lower than formerly. But the game little bastard never complained. He did his best by holding his ears very erect!

52

GEOFF and I went over to Brest together. It looks so deceptively near England that everyone thinks it a piece of cake, until he's been there. I was the same as all the rest. I didn't give the briefing half the attention I should.

So here we are, my bold sky-farers. Below is the English Channel. This is a job for a summer's evening, because of the short run.

There are all sorts of fake targets and dummy stuff but Geoff dissects them all and exposes them — remember what I said about him? Our pigeon is the harbor installations.

On the way over we all notice the usual banks of low fog in the Channel and approve of them highly, but as we approach the target area they thin out and blow away, blast them! I feel a peculiar tightness in my stomach — I get it every time, but that doesn't make it any easier.

We have to make a rather difficult approach practically down a lane of light. There are few night fighters. There are seldom many at Brest. But the flak is all a nightmare can imagine. The searchlight crews know their stuff too.

They're well protected in their concrete emplacements. So, too, the gunners. Nothing short of a saturation raid will mar their efficiency. And our little do is very far from that. Yes, they're mighty good down there. But then, so are we up here. We've been together a long time now.

Tonight, Geoff turns heavily onto the bombing run up to the target and a few night fighters have us on. Alec speaks up first on the intercom. Then he opens up. We might get out of it by evasive action but it's too late now. The interior of the aircraft begins to stink of burnt powder as the top gunner opens up to. Then there's a side attack. All this in a matter of seconds.

With half my mind I register that the tail guns are silent and that there's no reply from that station. Either Alec has beaten off the attack and his intercom is damaged or they've got him; the top gunner reports tail attacks. That tells its own tale.

Don goes back to the tail. I can't do a thing. We're on the bombing run and all these things seem to be happening to shadowy creatures outside my world. The old girl shudders once or twice but steadies up on track. I let everything go, signal bombs away, and then scramble back to help Don. He is trying to drag Alec out of his turret. He is dead all right. Horribly ripped about. All blood and guts. And hard to shift too.

All this time Geoff is weaving all over the show, dodging lights, fighters and known flak concentrations.

Then Alec comes out with a rush. Thank Christ all gunners are small. They have to be, to get into their turrets. When we fold him properly and have him almost out, the bloody nose goes right up again and back he pitches, squarely

in the blasted turret again. Just as I'm cursing Geoff, down goes the nose and out he comes like a cork out of a bottle. Don wriggles his way in. The guns are all right. Just greasy with blood and guts. The perspex is all ripped to hell but who cares about that so long as the guns work.

All this time the other gunners are engaged. There's a momentary lull and then they start again. The second dicky, in Don's place, is earning his ride. But it's not the fighters so much. It's the flak and the instability of the old girl.

When I am busy I have no time to be scared. Now I am, all right. Scared stiff. I begin to plot a course — a futile attempt at an air plot; weakly curse everything, feel violently sick, try not to think of Alec, wonder what to do.

You'll say I've been through it all before, and so I have, many times. True, but it never changes. The dry retching is the worst.

O.K. O.K. I've got no guts. So what? Who has? The gunners are busy, so are the pilots. My job is done with the release of the bombs, until we start for home, anyway, if you don't count the air plot for a point of departure. So I have time for terror. And it grips me damnedly.

We smash from side to side in frantic weaves; we climb, almost vertically, and then flop over on one wing and spin downward; we come out in the clear — no fighters, and in a merciful pool of darkness. Normally one thinks of a pool of light in the darkness. This time the whole place is lit up; a blaze of every kind of light — flares, searchlights, roman candles, flaming onions, gun flashes, incendiaries bursting in clusters, fires on the quays, fires in the streets, everywhere great masses of smoke. Anything you can imagine is a child's picnic to this.

They shot a wing off one of our fellows just as he was running in past us. He turned over quite slowly and then fluttered down in a horrible way, rather like a fly with one wing torn off by a sadistic child. He was much too low for anyone to get clear. He went into the smoke and glare. I didn't see any more.

Our little island of darkness is suddenly split by a dozen searchlights. In the glare I can see every detail in the office in front of me. We simply must get out of it. Brest is too hot. We're sunk. The lights have us and the greasy black blobs begin to appear around us. Then another kite blunders almost right on top of us. He's obviously out of control or at least very badly hit. We have no time to see more. Of course the lights switch to him for the certain kill and we make a break for it right on the rooftops. Chances are better down there. Fritz can't depress his guns as far as that.

And suddenly, miraculously, we are clear. Low down on the water, we light out for home. Believe me or not, it's dawn and there's some form of surface engagement below us. We're in no case to do anything about it with one dead engine and an airframe like a colander. It's curious, though, to have it dark enough to make the gun flashes clearly visible but light enough, if not to see, at least to guess at the positions of those involved. And the gun flashes and the white lines of trails on the sea betoken that a good time is being had by all. Our problem is to get home.

All this time Alec had been rolling around. So we secured him. A grisly business, that — lashing him so he'll stay put. I took no part in it.

I am setting the best route back. Once away from Brest there is a sudden unbelievable quietness. Even the naval en-

gagement is a silent one — at the distance. The thunder of the remaining engines is a usual and friendly sound. Little wisps of the fog we saw coming over still hang around. Hardly big enough to call them banks. The pale remainder of a bomber's moon still looks down on us.

A short outward journey, a short time over the target, and an easy return. To Brest always is. But it's one of the best-defended posts in the occupied countries . . . it's frighteningly well defended. It isn't as though we do much damage either. The Heavenly Twins* are still there, the great submarine shelters are bombproof and so are the quays. Of course we make the problems of supply pretty tough for them.

England's green and pleasant land, spread out in the light between the dawn and the moon is a lovely sight. Affection wells up in me at the sight of its crumbling chalk cliffs. And relief, too.

The weather is our friend. We can't miss now. As we make a rather clumsy circuit before touch down, somehow against my will I think of Alec, securely lashed, but his head lolling in time with the movements of the circuit. Alec. Alec.

Here am I sitting down to breakfast and Alec is dead. Stretched out awaiting burial. All that chirpy Cockney alertness under a sheet. Doubtless by now the firing party has been told off, next-of-kin notified in case they want the body, tentative time of the funeral decided "in order not to interfere unduly with the exigencies of the service," padre informed, and the whole depressing ritual of committing Alec

* *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*: German battleships.

back to his mother earth well under way. It's a gray morning but he won't mind. No handful of fighting kids, Alec. No nationalized pubs, now.

I had no time, last night, to think of him and this morning I'm drugged by tiredness, but it's another gap. Of course, he was only a gunner and gunners are practically written off from the time they go into the tail turret. He'd have stayed a flight sergeant all his service, too. A rough diamond, but a sweet gunner. Let that be his epitaph. He's a horrible liquid mess in his coffin under the ground now. And soon I'll be like him. I ought to have known: first Pip, then Alec. I wondered idly, at the time, who'd be next.

And Don never says a word about Geoff. Not a word.

53

I WONDER what the Air Force meant to Alec. He was talkative enough but one had to guess in the gaps. Geoff was keen to get him to talk about his life because he was interested in "postwar patterns." As it happened he wasn't to see any, but Alec told him all sorts of things it was very good for Geoff to know. What a drunken father means, for example. I could have enlarged on that one, but I'd not say a word. When I talked, say, to little sister, the early struggles lost nothing in the telling, but they were cleaned up for her ears.

Why do outsiders persist in thinking that British pubs are "inns"? The corner pub is much the same the world over. It's a swillshop. Alec grew up alongside one. It was a liberal

education. He couldn't remember when he first was able to distinguish at a glance those of the "private" from the "public" but he must have known the jug carriers from birth. The street fights after closing time, the ladies so very interested in the incapable drunk, the vomiting in the gutters, the cold eye of the jovial landlord, the weary eye of the copper on the beat, the public beating of children, these were mere background. A mere background to the ever present anxiety about eating.

He grew up "sharp." Everyone did. The others didn't grow up. He knew the generous drunk almost as soon as he learned to talk. Before he was school age he could tell the sadistic one from the merely unfeeling. He knew how far he could chance his luck, and he knew the consequences of misjudgment. I'll bet he'd have been astonished if he'd known the fellow feeling his stories awakened in me. Often I yearned to cap his stories — one of my weaknesses — but I didn't dare. I'd built up for myself a wall against those days. Other times my fellow feeling welled right up and I longed to compare life stories with him. He'd have misunderstood the approach and wouldn't have believed a word of it anyway. I was too obviously not of the pattern.

He was an ardent republican. One of the few Cockneys I met who was, so I couldn't help wondering what the Air Force meant to him. I found out in the oddest way. He was sketching for a rather scandalized Don his postwar picture and, as I listened, I saw the picture all right, but mostly I saw Alec. He had a vision splendid too. I didn't include any of the things the politicians tell us we are fighting for but if you believed in them, they were the things worth fighting for. And that was what the Air Force meant to Alec.

I wonder if Alec would ever have got his nationalized breweries and pubs. Not that there was anything much wrong with the pubs if no bastard of a landlord sends him home drunk to the missus and kids. I don't know about the pubs but the breweries look a certainty to be nationalized. Those enterprises which are already strongly centralized like the sugar industry, tobacco, steel, coal, cement and, of course, the breweries, have made their own fate certain. They have combined to such a degree that nationalization involves no more than changing the directors.

Alec and his missus — when he landed one — and his handful of kids. I'll bet they'd be a handful all right. When Don suggested, mildly as ever, that a woman's place was the home, Alec offered to narrow that down a bit. And that job. Where nobody could kick him out so long as he did a job. Nationalized, naturally. It's a shame he isn't to have his humble egalitarian postwar world of a guaranteed job, nationalized breweries, and tobacco, etc., and etc., a missus who knows that men are different, and that handful of lively, fighting kids. The lampposts, decorated with assorted members of the House of Lords seemed to him to give that wholly satisfying touch to an otherwise satisfactory landscape.

Incidentally, since the deification of the royal family of Britain is so capably advanced by the B.B.C., has anyone ever thought of what would happen if the vulgar were ever to secure control of the god-making mechanism? Not that they ever will.

In Alec's postwar world Britain wasn't going to try to foot it with the big boys. Alec was a Little Englander. But how fifty millions are to eat he didn't make clear. He wavered between emigration and intensive farming, but he hadn't really

thought about either. His simple remedy was to get rid of the parasites and to run everything for the good of us all. Although he talked of intensive farming, the countryside bored him flat. ("Just tell me whatever happens there.") Doubtless other people found it interesting, beautiful and so on. They were welcome to their views. After all it takes all sorts to make a world. All this with the large tolerance of complete ignorance. And what better base for tolerance than that?

Strangely, Alec wasn't going to emigrate himself, but he hoped the kids would. The old country isn't done yet but she will be by the time the kids grow up. And you've got to give them a chance. Must be hard though to say goodbye to them just when they're grown and to know you'll never see them again. All the same he hoped they'd go.

Now why did Alec fight with such skill and determination? He was a sweet gunner. Why did we feel so sure of him? I wonder what the Air Force meant to him.

54

AFTER Alec's funeral I had a chance to think about things. We had a spell after that do and I took a spot of leave to round off a very sound week. And then, bless my soul, the Heavenly Twins decided to "bolt from Brest," as the popular press put it. Curious that they should "bolt" right up our alley so to speak. When they were passing up Channel, Jerry had "local naval superiority" there, which is something Na-

pooleon would have liked. And, in passing, it shows how easily Fritz could have invaded us after Dunkirk. Why the devil did he not? What a colossal error of judgment or else a failure of intelligence.

Anyway, up-Channel they came with minesweepers out, flak ships, escort craft, E-boats; in fact the flotilla was practically a symposium of their naval stocks, so I was told. Our crowd didn't see a thing of them. Neither did most of the other squadrons. Our nav. just wasn't good enough. We didn't see a thing, but we heard plenty. Especially afterwards. And it was my luck to be on leave when all this happened; the one really important thing towards which all my training and inclination had been bent.

At first no one believed it. Then the horrible truth burst on us. To wit, if we bash away like that at sitting birds and the sitting birds are still seaworthy, what show have we of getting them when they're on the wing? The Public Relations Officers were in tears, wringing their hands and wailing: "What will the PUBLIC SAY?" Public Relations Officers always think of the PUBLIC in capital letters. Miserably they asked each other this and that, to end with: "They'll ask the most *awkward* questions!" I bet they will.

An overturned beehive most aptly describes the Royal Scare Force the next week. When such a thing happens (to the beehive I mean) I suppose the bees panic a bit and go around stinging each other. Get the idea? Besides, it was all so difficult to pin the blame on the Army, our usual scapegoat. So very difficult!

The night before there'd been the usual crop of decorations dished out for "setting an example of coolness and devotion to duty," etc. Don't think they weren't earned! Every-

one who goes to Brest deserves a gong, but the inference of damage is what's at fault. About this gong business the whole thing desperately needs reorganizing. There are ten times as many other ranks as officers, yet to date, ten times as many V.C.s have been awarded to officers as men, from which you'll gather, correctly, that it's a hundred times as difficult for another rank to get the gong. Anyway, why the hell a D.F.C. for officers and a D.F.M. for the second-class citizens? Yes, the whole gong business needs reorganizing or we'll be like the Yanks and wear them on both sides, the back and the backside.

Anyway, the Heavenly Twins left Brest. The story goes that some of our fellows narrowly missed being decorated for sinking them at the quay some hours after they'd left. It's a lie, I hope. It's all very difficult. Here we are, been bombing them fairly steadily for months and are gradually working the public round to believing that we're damaging them. In fact we were almost ready to hit the headlines with "R.A.F. sinks S. and G. at Brest," and back it up with the usual photographs if the boys in the back room could get the models finished in time.

They came up the Channel for a day and a night. Visibility varied from three miles down to half a mile. They moved quite slowly because they'd minesweepers and flak ships all around. The Navy found them all right but didn't have anything in their class, so it sent in the torpedo bombers and lost the lot. That's the Navy way. Stupid as they come, tradition-ridden, and as game as all hell. You've got to hand it to them. Why our blokes didn't find them is one of the major mysteries of navigation, something like Columbus making a landfall in India. What the hell was wrong? Didn't they want to pick them up? Did the naval losses have any-

thing to do with it? I don't really believe it did, but there's a lot that calls for explanation, and I haven't seen the explanations yet.

Spare a thought for whoever planned the whole remarkable feat. Hitler has some amazing people at call; tough, resourceful, packed with effrontery, and, above all, highly intelligent. For it was a remarkable feat. The last time a hostile fleet forced the Channel without loss was when Caesar crossed from Gaul.

I've flown over every inch of the route they followed and I still can't see how it happened. I've cross-examined as many of those who were in it as would submit to my inquiries and I still can't see. All I can think is that Fritz has kindly exposed for us either a basic flaw in our thinking or an astonishing breach in our practice. Either the whole idea that aircraft are a match for surface craft is an error or the Air Force is in need of overhaul. Faced with the Japanese successes, who will back the former?

If all the decorations awarded for Air Force attacks on the S. and G. were put in a bag and dropped on them they'd have been sunk at their moorings. If all the damage done in the newspaper offices by our raids were piled, column by column, on top of them there'd be no necessity to sink them. If — but what's the bloody use. They got away.

55

LYING here I can think quite dispassionately about the manner of Alec's passing and Pip's: especially Pip's. Don and I often talk of them. We feel as Noah must have done when he

finally realized that his family, alone, had survived the Deluge. And why should Don and I be chosen to survive? That is, if you count me a survivor.

Barring accidents, Don will live in the Post-Deluge world and mightily like a fish out of water he'll be. Not much shows on the surface, but underneath he could not help but be changed by all the oddities to which he has been exposed. Me, for example.

You see, while the storm rages and the waters of tribulation cover the earth, queer fish like me are in their element. But there's an end to all things. Perhaps there *is* a merciful God. Perhaps He knows what a mess I've made of things and how I hate making a mess of things, so perhaps very wisely, he's decided there's to be no more mucking about.

Only Don and I left. I wonder how long Pip was in the dinghy. *If* he were in the dinghy. I associate the rest of the crew so completely with Pip that they become, so to speak, projections of him.

When he was gone I was lost for a while. I used to moon about thinking of the most impossible chances, but always, of course, that he was in the drink. He'd ditched an aircraft even before that time I told you about. Remember it? When he towed Alec like a gilled trout. But his first ditching must have been a really hairy show. He used to tell us about it when explaining the necessity for the drill he used to give us.

He'd been in an old Wimpy coming home from one of those futile jobs on seaplane bases and the old crate had had enough. When she finally packed up, Pip put her down with the nose up because he "reckoned that she'd dive straight in otherwise." That shows how much they knew in those days.

about the technique of ditching. He'd told all hands to hold on like hell and counted noses in the water. The tail gunner didn't get out in time and they lost him. He was probably dead before she sank anyway. They got the dinghy out and threw it in the water. It wasn't punctured but they had a lot of fun topping it up. Then they scrambled into it as it twisted about, "like a bloody circular eel": thus Pip.

There was no ditching technique in those days and the equipment was pretty lacking too. The observer (they had a combination navigator-bomb-aimer-radio-operator-gunner in those days) had a couple of split ribs and a gunner a broken ankle, otherwise they were O.K. They had their rations and water but the paddles, not being secured as they are now, were lost. So they paddled with their boots.

Think of it! A crowded little dinghy, a dirty night, two injured men, mighty little rations and the enemy coast not too far away. So they turned their backs on it and paddled for England.

Water was their worst worry. The lack of it to drink and the superfluity of it in the dinghy in spite of constant baling, with the inevitable boot. It rained in little driving gusts, "but any water we collected was salt from the spray."

During the days the high winds chapped their faces and blew the tops off the choppy waves; at night they huddled even closer together; "our flesh began to pucker from being constantly wet, we didn't talk much, our tongues were swollen and our throats too sore — even Alec's."

In short spells they paddled for England.

They lost a boot during one of the interminable nights but the next day was fine. The observer still had the Verey pistol with which they hoped to signal help if any came their

way and if the pistol still worked. When I think of what we have today I'm amazed that anyone survived at all. They lost a couple but how they didn't all go for a Burton is a mystery.

They were eight days in the dinghy. When the weather cleared, "we would have liked to take off our clothes to dry them in the sun, but we were too weak." It appears that they dried anyway because "we were most damnedly hot in the middle of the day and the light on the water began to play up with our eyes."

One gunner, who was paddling, fell out and they were too weak to drag him back again. He floated alongside till night-fall but they lost him during the night. "He just bobbed there, looking at us. We took the boot before it fell out of his hands and sank. His tongue had swollen so much it was hanging out, his eyes were so red, just like the rest of us, that it was more painful with them closed than open. So he just stared at us. We tried to pass him his rations but couldn't get them into his mouth. I gave him the water even though I knew it would only dribble down his face. I wanted him to know we were treating him just like the rest and not writing him off. I didn't know how to feel when the light came and he wasn't there."

After that Pip took precautions against anyone falling out. Their rations were all gone and they didn't want any. Occasional instability showers, now the wind had dropped, enabled them to lap up a little water, but it was difficult for them to open their mouths, or to close them, if open.

They were beyond fear or hope but they were wryly contemptuous when one of our aircraft, on recce, in broad daylight, passed them within half a mile, "bastards keeping a watch like that deserve to be shot down by a submarine."

Then, miracle of miracles, they were seen and picked up in the middle of the night by a trawler busy on God knows what business so near the enemy coast. She was going dead slow ahead at the time or would have missed them. They were given sips of water and rolled in hot blankets and parked in the stokehold. There was no doctor on board, naturally, and the well-meaning skipper nearly killed them by trying to give them a tot of neat rum. Fortunately for them it dribbled out of the corners of their swollen mouths. But Pip has often lamented that circumstance.

During that eight days they had paddled or drifted nearly seventy miles, as near as I can calculate, but they were nearer the enemy coast when picked up than when they started paddling.

Pip used to speak of the old Wimpy with the greatest respect because "I thought she'd fall apart in the air and she hit the water such a hell of a crack, she had the best part of a hundred on the clock and she held together . . . good old girl. . . ."

They had played games on the first two days in the dinghy. Have you ever tried that game where someone starts with a letter and everybody adds one in turn, building up words until someone is stumped? Pip said "It's a bastard of a game. All the other sods knew too many bloody words." He also said that he never wanted to see a Horlicks' tablet again, or another piece of chocolate.

Sensible chap that he was, he drilled us all like hell, with dinghies in a hanger. Then we tried it in a pool to the great interest of all who could fake an excuse to be present. And it seemed that half the Air Force could.

At the time we hated it. Yet the more I think of Pip in

retrospect, the more I find to admire; his careful planning, his simple assumption of natural leadership, his competence, his courage, the whole grand manliness of him. If the padres know what they're talking about it's unlikely I'll ever see Pip again. I'm a poor type really, and I know where I'll end up, but God could hardly be omniscient if He wasted a guy like Pip.

56

I WONDER if anyone else is writing you. All the grounded pilots suffered from mental disturbances and I wonder if any others hit on my idea. Privately, I think it rather a good one. I get things off my mind and take care of the future at the same time. You know how I feel. There's no future except in the memory of those who bear one in mind and that's why I write to you and, well, there you are.

I suppose I'm a mental case. Am I? You can probably tell it from the self-conscious writing. I have the reader firmly in mind every careful minute. You're the reader. If I don't seize and hold you, bang goes my immortality — my immortality while you live.

Did someone say that no one was ever in mental trouble if he was worried about his sanity?

All I worry about is being clear. Why, I've even written down the current slang of the Air Force to the level it had when we were in New Zealand. Sometimes Don blinks at the obviously false qualities but I'm not writing for Don.

Perhaps it's all a little too pat. Things done and things

told are getting a little mixed now. In any case I am not one to hesitate about embroidering a tale. Still and all, the essential guts of what I say is as I say. I am Everyman. Everyman as a man of war. An unwilling man of war. That's why I've introduced you to the select circle of my friends. Do you feel you know Alec? And him a horrible liquid mess under the ground now. And do you know me any better for knowing them?

Don't listen to me today. Today's a bad day. They've begun to move my bed at night. I've just noticed that it is systematic.

It would serve me right if I've overdone all this. But I've nothing else to do. Have I squeezed all life out of these letters by my overnight revetting of them?

I wonder if anyone else is writing to you.

57

AN aircrew has a certain unity. In the best crews the captain has a sort of natural "headship," so to speak, in all they do. It becomes second nature to glance at him. The second dicky has the very difficult job of learning this indefinable leadership, but at the same time he has no opportunity to practice it. He must store it all up inside him until the dam breaks; in other words, until he becomes captain of his own aircraft. Some chaps never learn, of course. And the crew always knows. There's a tremendous lot of "crewing up" that no one who hasn't been part of it will ever realize.

The Pilots' Union is a reality, more's the pity. The gunners, too, are a closed corporation. They have their own fiercely guarded independence but they are bitterly conscious of not being pilots. Reselection is of continuous interest to them. Straight gunners are rare except in tail turrets and are despised unless particularly skilful. Nobody could despise Alec, the quality was there for all to see.

Most gunners are radio operators as well, and I know them chiefly from the radio bearings they get for me when we're coming home. A good bearing is worth a lot and a fellow who can get them is mighty useful. Especially as things are frequently difficult for him, what with static and enemy action and the tendency of a set which has suffered a direct hit to call it a night. Don's one of those little jewels.

Navigators like to think that they're a class apart. Maybe they are. We tell ourselves that we're the guys who set the courses to the target, bomb it when we get there and then bring the boys safely home. We like to think we have a kindly contempt for the taxi driver. We're the ones who get the really detailed briefing, and we're the principal prey of the I.O. on our return. But don't take that "kindly contempt" too seriously. Reselection does matter, and many navigators would dearly love to be pilots. Perhaps the way I avoid even thinking of the second dicky is because I envy him his seat. And not just for the view, either. Many navigators profess to regard pilots as rather dumb clucks, apart from their rather crude mechanical patter, and wax merry about the rumors of flight engineers for quite small bombers. But how many would turn down the chance to remuster to pilot?

Reselection is supposed, in theory, to ensure that each member of the aircrew is in the trade he can manage best.

Some can cope, some can't. I'd hate to suggest that the social advantages ever rise to the surface but pilots do tend to be social and to do better for women.

There's a sort of discipline of natural consequences in an aircraft where the crew has been together for some time and that keeps everyone up to scratch. Besides, there's the fellowship into which, curiously enough, the aircraft is admitted in terms of equality: the old girl is conceded to have a life of her own.

There's a fellow in our mess who was forced to order the abandoning of the aircraft over Holland. They all popped out and he was about to do the same when one engine picked up a bit and another ran in fits and starts. Of course you can guess the rest. "Gallant Aviator Refuses to Abandon Noble Steed," etc., etc.

He did, in fact, stick it out and try to slap her down in England but he made an awful mess of it. He cleaned up a row of houses and somehow didn't go for a Burton himself. After the butcher boys had done their stuff upon him he eventually recovered but what interested me was what he told us as we sat around: ". . . and, honest, the old girl was a trier and when the motors packed up I just hated to sort of leave her on her own, so I was as pleased as hell when the two motors picked up a bit and I said to her 'Come on, you old bitch — England or the ditch.' Pretty good that. Wish I had said it. Anyway, she'd cut a bit sometimes and we'd have a look at the drink and then she'd pick up a bit and we'd flounder away from it. And all the time I was thinking 'Good old girl, you little bew-tie.' So we crabbed and staggered all the way back. I was sorry how it all ended up. She was a great trier, honest she was."

We all nodded our heads without speaking. We knew how it was. Do you gather what I mean by saying that an aircrew has a certain unity? It's just dawned on me that what cements the unity is the aircraft; it's the old girl herself that holds us all together.

Sometimes, however, there's no option about abandoning. It's off you go. Nevertheless one can make mistakes. An aircraft, abandoned over the sea, flew inland nearly a hundred miles before it crashed. I spoke to my opposite number about it. He said: "The skipper told us all to decant and then he trimmed her to fly straight and level and we all pushed off. That's all there is to it. But the old girl, being trimmed to fly straight and level, simply went on doing just that. There was a hell of a fine full-dress inquiry but the evidence they really needed they couldn't get. The old girl was not there to defend her literal interpretation of instructions."

Get the role of "the old girl"?

All of which gives me an idea. As you know, each aircraft as it grows older, becomes less useful, whereas the longer the aircrew is together the more valuable it becomes. As a unit, I mean. Now, let's suppose that, for really shaky do's, we fuel an aircraft with just sufficient to take it to the target. The crew take it off the ground, set it on course and then bale out. Over the target, out of fuel, in she goes. The bomb load could be very heavy because no return fuel would be needed, and they could fly really high to make interception problematical. Not that the R.L. blokes wouldn't get on to them but the interception would be another matter. The machine could be dirt cheap so long as it would fly high. Really high. Of course I've left out the adjustments to course made in flight, the very *raison d'être* of the navigator, but perhaps we

could fit the machine with a simple emitter gadget by which it could be tracked and its course corrected while in flight. But I suppose Fritz, who's the very devil at horning in on a good line, would jam the whole show.

As a matter of fact the whole idea is not so good. This war has only one redeeming feature and that is the deep and lasting comradeship between man and man and I'd hate to become roboted, even to save lives. Isn't it odd how we welcome more and more gadgets but not those which would eliminate us, and the risks which we all run.

Aircrews are growing bigger, more's the pity. Some Yank aircraft, Tex says, have stations for thirteen. We inquired if that total included the newsreel cameramen and Tex had us all on beautifully. "Why, no," said he, "those guys are extra. Superpriority extras. To make room for them and their necessary gadgetry, unessentials have to be reduced so, after much thought, we cut down the bomb load. And every pilot enters into a solemn obligation not to jettison the news over the target. Everyone has to take a social trustworthiness test to determine whether he is safe to be trusted with the news. Most of us have a small pamphlet compiled by a hired psychologist on how to flunk this test." Not much change to be had out of Tex, is there?

But big crews mean that the very close friendships are tending to become less and less common and there may even be two well-defined circles among the crew. Based on rank, usually. That's a bad, bad thing. I've been lucky. We'd been together for quite a long time before Pip bought it and then I had a wizard time with Geoff. They were the only two. I've not been buggered about as much as most. Then there was Alec who probably had a better grip on reality than the rest

of us. At the bottom end, but reality just the same. And Don. Especially Don. I'll bet he's made it. Trust Don. His calm inner security was a blessing to us all. Though how he came to be called Don when he was born in Shropshire is something of a mystery.

Second dickys come and go. Odd bodies pop up now and then. But, by and large, we were a happy family. First, Pip. Then Alec. Then Geoff. He must be gone or Don would have mentioned him. And now me.

Then there was one. Don will live to a ripe old age, placidly surveying his farm, and occasionally grossly extending his horizon to include Shropshire. Remember when the world was wider, Don? Remember us! Remember us all! An aircraft is a great place to play "Happy Families."

58

I SUPPOSE there's a plan somewhere. I was thinking something of the kind as we listened to the briefing for a job we were to do on our own. A daylight job. We were to photograph carefully the beaches in a certain area almost opposite Dover. You might wonder if it foretold a landing by us or fear of a landing by Fritz. So did we.

The photos at the briefing, however, were so good that no one could help wondering why any others were wanted. Of course there's always the chance of significant changes. But what is significant?

There was a light breeze at take-off. There usually is on

the east coast. I once met a Dutchman who told me he couldn't remember a windless day in his country. What a place to operate aircraft.

It was a lovely morning. The flat fen lands reveal their customary neat geometry. The line of the sea is clearly visible. The world looks very good to me. If only there's no opposition interest in our proposals. Photographic aircraft should be labeled "innocuous" in two languages.

From the air we can see very clearly how the Channel was made. The cliffs on either side are very similar and the Goodwin Sands are sharply outlined, even the part which is under the water. Looked at this way it seems odd that there's been no progress with the idea of a Channel tunnel. Too late now, but it seems like a good idea that should have been carried out before the air age which is sure to follow this war, in the event of there being sufficient survivors.

The modest cliffs this side of Dieppe were our pigeon. Does Fritz have observation posts on the cliffs? He'd be a goat not to. Or is it something about the beaches at the foot of the cliffs?

We line up for the job. Then the defense opens up. Ground fire. Probably hadn't bothered about a single aircraft until we were drawn to attention. The fighters should be along in about ten minutes. By which time we'd be elsewhere. Everybody knows the game.

Do you remember how you used to talk about watching A.A. shells on their way up? It's true of course. When one is photographing there's a great chance to watch that sort of thing. The projectile comes up quite slowly and then accelerates as it comes closer. Or that's what it looks like. Usually it seems to drift astern. That's because we notice those coming

for us and not those dangerous ones which are aimed ahead of our track.

There's that sudden rush and then, even more suddenly, the explosion. It always takes us by surprise. The crashes and the whines of fragments, the air disturbances, but, above all, the uncertainty of hit or miss. It's wonderful what an aircraft will stand in the matter of A.A. fire but any hit at all reduces efficiency and is a bonus for the fighter defense.

This time we took one aboard just as we lined up for the job. I thought it was bad work in the office and snarled at them to steady the old girl on track. In the intervals of scrabbling all over the sky I got roughly what we wanted, but it took much longer than I had expected. Which brings Willi Messerschmitt into the picture. Don't believe anything you hear about the Me. being no good. It's damnably good.

The first thing we knew of it was a stream of tracer over the port cowling.

Think of it. The old girl practically unmanageable at a time when evasive action was our only hope. The hydraulic gear gone too. Think of what that means to the gunners.

Down on the sea we went. Bloody lunacy that, when the old girl can't be controlled. But it was a case of sit on the sea or be shot down into it. I had plenty of time to work myself up into a fine frenzy of activity. The old girl shudders when hit. I shudder with her. Our own guns open up when they bear. I noticed the dinghy full of holes and thought sourly of this business of sitting on the sea. Especially, as all our maneuvering was lateral and hence death on navigation. Not that I cared with England so clearly visible — it was just the principle I objected to.

The Me. made a final near-suicide pass at us. He was as good as in the drink but just crabbed away from it. Probably out of ammo and nearly out of fuel he departed to report having damaged us. He had, too. But why only one of them? We were a sitting duck for two, damaged as we were.

And so home to listen to a list of the damage. The old girl was hardly parked before the riggers were all over her. They take a ghoulisn delight in pointing out things better not pointed out. One went through a damaged panel, dropped a fair distance and broke his ankle.

The general opinion is that it is quite remarkable what an airplane will fly without.

59

IF I were only in New Zealand now. "God's own Country" they call it — so called with special fervor by those who have never left its shores and so have no opportunity of comparing the 'prentice efforts of the Almighty when He created, say, the United States. How wise not to look abroad. They have found their Fortunate Isles. Why should they roam? Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. There's a special virtue in the earth and sky of that little country. Sometimes it even extends to the people, too.

There was a conchy I knew once who wrote a line or two of some merit. One day we were leaning over a bridge and watching the dusk purpling in the valleys. There was still a flush on the snow and the noise of the river seemed as much

part of the evening as the first mosquitoes. I'd like to be buried in New Zealand. My heart has never left it.

Should I have mentioned I was on leave and was fraternizing with a conchy I liked and admired? He belonged to an obscure religious sect not recognized for purposes of conscience by the exemption committees. In consequence he was set upon by young thugs in the name of high patriotism, almost in the shadow of the cathedral in a small town. Can you guess which? And I wonder what the spirit of Christ — assuming Him to inhabit the cathedral — made of these young patriots?

I only know I don't want to die here. I want to die in New Zealand. Even if they repatriate me I'd never reach those little islands. I mustn't think of the church window at Waiho, nor of evening along Hongi's Track, nor, even, of the abashed silence of the tourists in the Glow Worm Cave.

If I put a fern frond at the foot of the Wishing Tree, do you know what I would wish? I'd wish that I could put a fern frond at the foot of the Wishing Tree in Hongi's Track in New Zealand. It might not be a good idea to think about the Glow Worm Cave because the darkness and the silence and the soft lapping of the water, combined with the glow worms above, and reflected below might make one feel too disembodied. That's something I'd like to avoid.

Don't think further of the little country. Leave it to those who will survive to enjoy it. I must not hear again the deep warm Maori voices say "Waikaremoana" or "Aotearoa." Each syllable distinct and ending with its vowel. How I love voices! And how I love New Zealand! Unashamedly I'll say it.

THE stories men tell illustrate something about men in general as well as throwing a hell of a lot of light on the storyteller. I suppose that's why I probe at fellows so much. Catch a man late at night and alone, and if you touch the right chord, he'll talk, and once he's under way he'll forget you, provided he's comfortable and at rest, as they say of bomber crews.

We were the last two left in the mess. The fire was dying and we drew our chairs a little closer to it. The night messman was half asleep and slopped our tea into our saucers but we didn't say anything about it. We'd been half asleep, ourselves, in our time.

Very gently, I probed into Jerry's escape. All the same, and however gently I did it his eyes flicked wide open and then glazed over a bit. The skin grafts on his face showed yellow for a moment.

"Oh, I forgot," said he. "The Grand Inquisitor. The amateur M.O. Poking round for L.M.F., eh? Don't you know we all see through that? Who d'ye think you are? Why don't you look for L.M.F. in yourself?"

"I do," I said, "perhaps my interest in my fellow man isn't unconnected with the safety of the pelt." I could afford to let the mockery pass. I'd seen him with the curtain up.

Jerry looked into his cup as though seeing things in the dregs of milky tea. Perhaps he was. "D'you mean you get scared about, say, a parachute drop, or a fire, or both?" in a curiously gentle, faraway sort of voice. I grunted, but I

doubt if he heard me. "There's nothing to it. Out you go. Bloody glad you can get out. When the order comes you'll find you do your drill rather like a clockwork toy. Discipline wins over panic every time, I imagine."

I think the little pause here was to enable Jerry to rid himself of me.

". . . Out you go then. A blast of the air is a hell of a surprise and maybe you're a second or two late in starting your count. But once you start counting, everything settles into a comfortable mechanical sequence. Sure enough the brolly opens with a really handsome jerk and you begin to wonder if you'll ever be any use to a woman again." There was a short bark of laughter at this point but I didn't even glance at his skin grafts.

". . . Why don't they invent some sort of rubber spring to take some of the jolt out of the opening? Anyway, here we are, brolly open and a curious feeling of being cushioned on the air. Very peaceful.

"Yet I remember that, as I tumbled head over heels before the brolly opened, I saw others snap open. The silk streamed out, a kind of shiver went through it and then it snapped open. Now how did I notice all this and still keep counting while I was turning over and over? There were several open below me and they looked black against the glare of the fire. Presently I noticed them disappear into the smoke and the thought hit me like a blow: they're dropping into that inferno. I'm dropping into the same place."

In the little following silence I stole a look at him and his grafts were a fiery red. He was still looking into the cup.

When he took up the tale again the gentle, dreamlike quality was all gone from his voice. He spoke in rapid gusts, with

wheezing silences between them. And I lie here, remembering him. And understanding him, too.

“ . . . Dropping in! At this very instant I become conscious of the air being full of missiles. Now, why hadn't I noticed them up where the stuff was bursting? Was it the fire that brought all the other perils to my mind? Up to this time I'd been pillowed on the air, mighty comfortable and hardly conscious of dropping at all, but as soon as the fire came into my mind I realized at once I was dropping rapidly into it. Somehow the rate of descent seemed to accelerate. Oh, I know you'll tell me that it just seems to drop faster as the ground approaches but that's a fat lot of comfort.”

Jerry made little licking noises and I could hear his breath.

“ . . . How the hell to steer clear of the flames? My instructor told me that 'the parachute can be steered to a limited degree by manipulating the shrouds.' Now's the time to manipulate the bloody shrouds, but where the hell to? There's fire, explosions, and smoke as far as the eye can see (which isn't far), and one direction's as good as another. The only certain one is down. So down we go.

“The air is getting thicker. Smoke in billowing gusts and warm. Yes, warm. Must be the hot air rising from the fire. Fairly heavy flakes of soot too, some almost as big as your hand and positively whipping past. I must be dropping fast. But wait a minute, I'm going down and the soot is coming up; all the same I'm dropping bloody fast. The smoke denser, the soot bigger, the light duller, but now and then the murk split by great gouts of fire. Fresh bombs bursting, or perhaps the fire has found something especially inflammable.

“When will the drop end? A tongue of flame flicks past so

close it singes my flying suit. There's a sea of flame below and it's clearly visible now and it seethes and bubbles and every now and then the accursed tongues leap up at me. Falling into hell! Falling into hell! Hot! Hot! Everything hot. The air's too hot to breathe. It sears your lungs. Close your eyes. Put your arms over them. Save your eyes, no matter what. Better limbless than blind. Breathe in the curve of your elbow. Folded up like this you're protected all over. Not exposed at all. If you can breathe."

I chanced another look at his face. Dear God, "protected all over." Well, I know what he was talking about, now.

In a quiet conversational tone he began again. "Brolly's on fire."

He was quiet so long I thought that was all. Oh, no.

". . . The ground? Where's the ground? Suit's afire! Boil in your own sweat. Boil, swell and blister. Just a breath of air, just one smallest gust of wind to bring me a breath and let me see the ground. Of course I didn't get it.

"A hell of a crack, partly on the legs, partly on the arse and then dragging over rubble and hot ashes. Christ, it's painful. And who's dragging me? It's the remnants of the brolly, of course, lifting and dragging in the thermal gusts from the fires. Automatically I punch the release and scream at the pain in my fist. Then I lie there, just as I had fallen.

"Clearly the civil defense has abandoned this sector of the city. There's no roar or hiss of water, no sound of explosions as they blast firebreaks in the ruins. No explosions of bursting bombs either because the raid is over now. Merely the minor explosions of gas mains and stored inflammable stuff.

But the roar of the fire is here all right, a roar that no one can mistake. I lie and listen to it. Quite comfortable now, I'm not being bashed about by the brolly.

"Then a vagary of the wind licked a tongue of fire my way. That woke me up all right. When I heave myself upright I discover my feet are hardly burned at all. That's a blessing. I'm going to need them. So I can walk.

"Almost at once I nearly fall over a body. Then another. And another. They look uninjured, so why are they so dead? The smoke perhaps? Nearer the rubble are mashed-up bodies. All dead. I begin to wonder if I am too. Or is this all an hallucination from which I'll wake? Wake me now, if it's so.

"Why no wounded? Why all these unmoving silent bodies? Remains of men and women and children. Relics, rather. Occasionally the flickering light of the fire gives an illusion of movement and I stumble in that direction. God, how I want to help someone.

"Why no wounded? Of course. The enormous effect of our new blockbusters dropped into a fire, tremendous already; the shock wave of gases and smoke, of course; even the wounded would be choked.

"So I sat down with my silent companions to ask myself how I was to get to hell out of it all."

I stole another cautious look at him. He licked his lips a few times but the red gradually died out of his face and a calmness that surprised me came over him. He had a shrewd, considering sort of air.

". . . You know, your uniform is your only title to the status of a prisoner of war, but it also practically guarantees

you'll end up that way. So, in defiance of the good book and its rules I went among the corpses looking for one about my size. Among so many it wasn't hard. I debated whether I leave him naked or to put my gear on him. If I dress him in my uniform he may be buried as me and so make my escape that much easier, but if he's recognized, everyone spots the deception at once, and everyone except me knows that the hunt is up. If I leave him naked he may have been stripped by looters. Query? Then why not the rest? I put that one behind me and threw my stuff into the fire.

"The time to beat it for the open country was now. When all civil organization has gone to hell nobody is going to question a poor, dumb, shocked refugee from terror. The point being: which way to go? Then Fritz, with all his thoroughness, came to my aid.

"I beat it as fast as I could shamle. Any direction so long as it was away. I had barely walked any distance at all when I ran into the first of the civil defense fellows, working in conditions to chill the blood. Compassionate, brave, disciplined. The best type of man on either side in this hellish mess.

"They took me, quite gently, to a clearing station, clucking sympathetic Teutonic clucks at my dumbness. Told me it's not unusual to be dumb after shock and then watched me carefully to see if I showed signs (or lack of them), of deafness too. I felt a louse.

"It wasn't difficult to slip away from the charnel-house collection of maimed and mangled bodies and bland minds. I must have been the only normal person there apart from the wardens. No. It wasn't hard to slip away."

He turned a strange, sleepwalker's gaze on me, then stiffened. I suppose my expectant look must have alarmed him. He gave me a sidelong, cunning look. I knew then I wasn't to hear anything about how he actually escaped. Perhaps because there might be others on the same route?

The skin grafts were a tired yellow now. He hitched himself out of his chair and walked across the anteroom with the curious stumping walk I'd not noticed until this moment, and left me to the tired messman, the slopped over saucers, the smell of stale cigarettes.

6I

Do you ever wonder how I get all this stuff down? It must amount to a hell of a lot by now. Sometimes I wonder how much and then wonder, is it too much? Have you persevered thus far?

Occasionally I wonder if all this isn't an hallucination and I shall wake up in New Zealand and find that the war has been a dream. Did I mention the difficulty I have sorting out things done from things heard? It's true. I have no way of referring to anything here. I guess there's a fine mixture in all this.

What was I saying? Oh, how I do my stint.

Usually I try to do one complete section at a time. Sometimes it's very short and finished in a few minutes, to Don's surprise, and relief, I imagine. My first solo, for example. Have you come to that yet? Sometimes it takes a long time

because it's a long story, which means I have to try to break it up into reasonable-sized portions. It's surprising what can be done in two or three hours if it's all clearly in mind at the beginning. Of course some bits are much too long for a single sitting. But I do try to finish it consecutively because I never recapture the feeling of it once it is committed to Don's care. I never see it again nor do I wish to.

So, if I contradict myself now and then; well, then, I contradict myself.

My greatest worry is how long I have to finish it all. My next, that I don't know how much there still is. I'd hate to die with anything unfinished, but what on earth should I do if I finish before I die? What will be left for me?

Now and then I try to work out how many pencils Don has worn out and how many thousands of words he has written. It's so long ago since I started that I can't remember when. And when I ask Don how many words, he always says "about a million." It can't be as much as that, but it must be a hell of a lot.

Isn't this a bore? Why should I try Don's patience with this when I had something really important ready for today? Sidetracked again.

Today isn't a bad day either. Just a dull one. And now I've got hold of this dull theme I just can't let it go. Am I kidding myself that the way I sort things out matters in the least? All that matters is that you should read . . . and read . . . and read. Right to the bitter, bitter end.

When I think of you, New Zealand comes flooding back into my mind. In a very special sense this war was fought to make a world fit for New Zealanders to live in. To make all the world comparable with New Zealand, no matter how remotely.

So you have a duty upon you for the rest of what I hope will be a long life. New Zealanders should be worthy of their good fortune, but how can they, unless they know it to be good fortune? There, my friend, is your life's work!

62

I'LL tell you what the face of fear is. I know what it looks like. It looks like George.

George looks you squarely in the eye. He knows that that's the mark of a man who's unafraid so he looks steadily at a point some feet behind your head. You can feel the effort it is. That unfocused stare, fairly shrieking of torment.

George shakes your hand firmly. He remembers that too. Carefully. But he can't remember to stop flicking his fingers. He remembers sometimes, but not always. The middle finger of the right hand on the thumb: a little enough sound, but he does it all the time. Except when he remembers not to. You can see the painful remembering.

George doesn't jump when addressed unexpectedly, not unless it is very unexpected indeed. He turns slowly. When he remembers.

He covertly watches the Medical Officers. We all do, but George has a greater urgency in his watching. We all know the M.O.s are in the mess to spy on us. They're looking for L.M.F. and, now and then, they find it but not if we can help it. I wonder what they're watching in me? The M.O.s have been through flying courses, they've flown on operations and, in theory, they have the score. Of course, they haven't, not really. It's one thing to go along for the ride

and quite another to be doing the job, carrying the responsibility, again and again. It's the next time after the next time which stretches the nerves. How can the M.O.s know that? Of course they're brave men, whatever that may be. And they study their problems with excellent concentration while the aircraft is being shot to pieces all around them. Oh yes, they have their courage with them. But they don't carry the baby.

Usually they're very decent guys. Young. Well able to take their share in the horseplay on dining-in nights and, to the outsider, quite indistinguishable from the rest of the mess. But we know. Oh yes, we know. It isn't just the ever present faint "medical odor" either.

They're here to spy on us. To watch for the little chinks in the armor. To look for the little giveaway that one's friends tactfully ignore. The idea seems to be that it's better to find out such things before cowardice blows up in your face and it could easily be right. The trouble is, we can't help taking it personally. So we're as polite and friendly as a ladies' finishing school. And cagey isn't the word for us.

George went off on do's the same as the rest of us, but navigators under instruction went along for the ride quite a lot. Much more often than with the rest of us navigators. Has he noticed that, too? Or the lazy, good-natured desire of the medicos to butt in on the solitude he likes so much? If George doesn't notice, we do. I mentioned this to Geoff, rather idly, but he gave me such an odd look in reply that I wondered if he thought of himself as in the same boat, as indeed he very nearly was before we went on those long summer runs to Norway. It's just struck me, though; was he thinking of me?

George likes to sit alone and read. He takes a chair in a corner because no one can get behind him that way. He doesn't ever shift a chair into a corner. Oh no, nothing so obvious. He just looks around for one. Happily in his corner chair, he picks up a magazine and methodically turns the pages. He remembers to keep his right hand in his pocket. What he thinks won't bear thinking about.

Then, quite suddenly, he was posted to a conversion course. He thought it was one of those slap-up affairs when new advances come out in navigation and the first bunch go off to get the gen. Or did he? It turned out to be an instructor's course.

George was a good instructor, a very good one; he knew the score from every angle and he was a damned good navigator; yes, that's right — good and damned. His navigation was first rate, and that, coming from me, can be taken at face value; he was highly intelligent and very patient. Especially with himself.

The strange thing was that his finger flicking grew worse. You know something of most things. Tell me why he didn't get his grip back when he was removed from nearly all risk. He should have. He had a cushy job, yet a useful one and one he could do standing on his head. No M.O.s to haunt him. Why then the flicking fingers?

He avoided all the operational crowd, took all his leave in out-of-the-way places, grew more silent and wide-eyed. But, of course, with so many needing his kind of course he couldn't quite bury himself.

How do I know? Oh, I ran into him in one of his little hide-outs. And what was I doing there, did you ask?

George looked at me with that wide blank stare but I'll

swear that something flickered in his eyes before he got his fearless gaze operating. We shook hands. That firm grip. And that finger flicking! That bloody, God-damned finger flicking!

We talked idly. About this one and that one. When we came to someone who'd bought it, there was a sudden tensioning in the air. Or was I imagining that, too?

Life at a training station had its points. There was the regularity, the lack of the unexpected, the constant intake of new faces — there was even the safety of the pelt. He volunteered our old pleasantries with a ghastly parody of nonchalance and then I knew he was in a worse case than before. Once he could tell himself it was all his imagination and half convince himself that no one else suspected. Now, no such self-deceit was possible. His nakedness was patent to all.

All of this so upset me that I suggested we take on the town. He looked at me quickly, perhaps to see if there were any signs of mockery, or worse, pity. I hope to God I showed neither. Then the fear that alcohol might loosen his tongue quite obviously occurred to him and so London was out. Mercifully I remembered that he was very interested in literary stuff and I remembered, too, that someone or other was holding forth in that line at the Churchill Club.* When I made the suggestion he fairly leaped at it. He could keep his very careful guard up.

So we attended what turned out to be a mighty interesting affair. Surprisingly well attended, too. Quite a sprinkling of women, into the bargain, but I couldn't help noticing that

* Churchill Club; founded by Mrs. (now Lady) Churchill in Ashburnham House, part of the Westminster School, in 1943, as a place for servicemen of all ranks to meet artists and keep contact with the arts.

they were pretty close herded and, in any case, the pursuit of the literary types is a long-drawn-out affair like the siege of Troy and, like that military adventure, only to be successfully terminated by a little intelligent subterfuge. It was the number of brown jobs that I remarked most. Is the Army more alert than the Air Force or are there just more of them to get to shows like this? Anyway, everyone appeared keenly interested and the discussion which followed was quite absorbing. George even put his spoke in, mighty shrewdly too. But he was very embarrassed when all eyes turned on him and his finger flicking was almost continuous. However, the adventure was sufficiently emboldening to run to two cups of coffee apiece afterwards and then very cautiously, a single nightcap.

As we walked through the blacked-out city George talked to me of his boyhood. I knew he had been a very good footballer (rugger, of course) but I was astounded to note how freely he admitted he hated getting hurt and that only an odd quirk of exhibitionism kept his nose to the ball. Perhaps it was the shifting moonlight and the broken clouds and the queer feeling one always gets when alone in a blacked-out city. The feeling that you have the city to yourself. Perhaps he thought he was talking to himself. He spoke of his parents and his brothers and sisters and then of well-remembered more distant relatives. A close-knit and affectionate family. Of his university days and how useful a talent for rugger can be. Of getting a start in his profession, and I was surprised at his eminence in it, for his youth. But, as we approached the outbreak of war he edged backwards on another tack, back to the safe comfortable days.

Every man in the Air Force is a volunteer. I suppose to

join is one way of exhibiting your superior courage. That may have been the trap which social pressure sprung on George.

Lying here, without hope and with no future to worry me, I often think of George. I'm so bloody afraid, myself, right now, that George seems very real, almost as though he were standing here beside me. You see, like George, I've been afraid all along. George will survive this war and live out a long life with his memories, but I wonder if God has been kinder to me. Oh no, I don't. All I want to do is to live — no matter in what shape or pain or with what memories — just to live.

The last time I saw him I thought he looked much thinner but that may have been the light. He didn't jump nearly as much as he used to do and the dreadful finger flicking, while nearly continuous, was so soft as to be inaudible except to one listening for it. I'd have thought him recovering but for the blank stare, so much worse, and the way he didn't let go his firm handshake until, with an effort he remembered and dropped the embarrassing hand.

This is the end of the line. There's a limit to what the nervous system can take. Soon the stare will grow blanker still and the movements slower. The sensitive mechanism is running down . . .

In mercy, let's think no further of George. Not now.

63

MANY of the chaps are very superstitious. Good luck tokens or charms are very common. And there are one or

two odd tales as well. Of course I'm not superstitious. Not at all. But queer things do sometimes happen somehow or other.

There was an Aussie who had a rabbit's foot he bought in New Orleans. He says he found it in his pocket after a most unlikely séance; we all swear he bought it while he was drunk. It had a little silver mount and a tiny silver chain. He used to wear it round his neck under his shirt. He most devoutly believed that it was the reason for his phenomenal luck — and it was phenomenal — far beyond mere coincidence.

What do you make of this? Twice he was the sole survivor of his crew, once from a crack-up at take-off and once in the sea. Another time he was smuggled out of Holland by the underground when all the others were grabbed and put in the bag. He won second prize in a big sweep, he received swags of parcels from home, all without loss, and finally he was posted to an apple-polishing job at Air Ministry — all in one marvelous year. There it is. Take it or leave it!

The little charm went with him everywhere. Reminds me of American Negroes and it did come from New Orleans, but it worked, apparently. He used to reach up and hold it in his left hand when making big decisions and, strangely, he made those decisions without reflection or consideration just as if he were told what to do.

I wonder if charms and the like give us the confidence to trust our own judgments? And when we really do trust our own judgment things break right for us. But how the hell can events over which we have no control and indeed may not even know about, suddenly go all our way when, before, luck was all against us? I inquired closely about that Aussie I told you about and he had been no luckier than anyone else

before he got that rabbit's foot but afterwards — well, what do you make of it?

And now I suppose you'll tell me that we can apply probability to all things and they usually work out that way if we know enough about them. All right. I believe you. But there are some quite inexplicable exceptions. I know it doesn't help my case that a rabbit's foot has become a joke as a good luck token. Perhaps it wasn't much of a case after all.

Good luck tokens, however, are much less common than other forms of superstition; three men and one match, for example, and so forth. Much rarer is the belief in clairvoyance, yet some of the toughest guys consult fortunetellers — as though they knew a thing about the future. And I may as well tell you that it's rumored that at least one R.A.F. Command is run by reincarnated spirits or astral essences or something of the kind.

The mass favorites, though, are horoscopes — the Gypsy Petulengro and similar types cast them *en masse* in the cheaper newspapers. Are you a Pisces? I rather think you are — a queer Pisces. For myself, I'll settle for any Virgo.

Horoscopes! Huh! Now there *is* something to despise! The poor Pisces who cast the horoscopes don't even know that the stars change position and precession makes sure they no longer occupy the houses once theirs. Flight of time has evicted them. Poor homeless stars!

64

I SUPPOSE it's time I ceased trying Don's patience. It's all very well to grin but it must be pretty grim; every day, and a

couple of hours each time, I should imagine. I can't tell time but I guess it's at least that. Why do I say so little about you, Don? You know, Don, when I looked back on it, we've been together ever since operational training days and that's a long time now.

A front gunner is a jack-of-all-trades and a master of some. He's a gunner, a radio operator, a medical man, and a se-creter of food. He can produce almost anything if it's been lost long enough to be written off. Any new skill demanded in aircrew? Teach it to the front gunner. They're like the engines — you'd notice their absence.

If all good things come to an end there can be no exceptions. It's the nothingness that worries me. I've always been so intensely preoccupied with myself that the mere idea that I shall be utterly forgotten and conveniently stowed away in the ground is terrifying. I suppose, Don, that's why I'm so grateful to you for taking all this down, but why bother, Don? Are you laying up treasures in Heaven? Oh, my approaching annihilation! All religions realize that the mere nothingness is terrifying, and they all base their appeals on a continuation of the essential self after the body's horrible decay. Why believe it? In what way do I, now that I've lost my mobility, differ from the tree which will shortly use me as food? I'd like to say "Who cares?" but I can't. I do.

I'd like to have a word with a padre. A Roman Catholic one for preference. They're so sure. So bloody sure. The others would be afraid of me, I should think. In my relentless search for certainty for myself I might upset theirs. I know the old doctor would get me one if I asked. Should I ask, Don?

What a climb down that'd be! To crawl to Him as I die, after despising Him all my life, and certainly living in a way

He must despise. No, not despising Him. Despising those who believed in Him, just because I, personally, couldn't feel the need for a first cause.

Anyway, why ask the padre? In a short time I'll know better than he does. There'll be a resolving of all doubts soon. What a position for a navigator! His job is to get you there and get you back!

65

I've been wondering what it is like to be a prisoner. I can't tell you because I don't know. I'm so much out of the world of men that how living folk feel is getting a little dim in my mind.

Wait a minute. I do know the feel of captivity. Of course. When I come to think of it I'm doubly a prisoner. Perhaps that's why Don looks at me so oddly when I inquire how he is taking being in the bag. Sometimes he just looks at me queerly and says nothing. Other times he says: "But surely, you know!" Well, do I?

Would you say that I am lying here in the sure and certain hope of release? And it won't be long either. Today I'm quite indifferent about when it comes. I'm as placid as a hibernating bear. It could be tomorrow.

But Don was only bruised and he's fully recovered now. I'll bet he's thinking and planning escape. Trust Don. If he doesn't make it from here his chances are remote from anywhere else. We're so small and makeshift here.

They're sure to draft him off soon. At least that's what he told me when he brought along a couple of you blokes and introduced them as fellow prisoners who would take letters for me. Don said . . . "in case I'm not here when you want me . . ."

It's a soldier's duty to escape if he can. I run over all that in my mind but it's taking place in a world outside mine. I lie here, warm, fed, alone. An existence rather like that in a cocoon. Partial dissolution, too. Except that there isn't any escape to a glorious winged stage. Unless of course primitive Christian ideas of angels turn up trumps.

Now that I've someone else to take letters, I'm giving a lot of thought to Don. Captivity must irk him more than most. That and enforced discretion. He's never said a word of Geoff. And I never inquired. Obviously he's dead. I wonder how it happened but I daren't ask Don because it's so obvious that he and I are the only survivors. That is if you count me as anything.

Don tells me it's not so bad really. Irsome to feel restraint even when you don't bump against it. It nags and nags until the mere not being able to do things is pure horror. "A sort of hysteria," said Don, judicially. Apparently men beat with the hands against walls or the wire. Especially the wire. It's a symbol of course. Men in cages. Where no man should be. I wonder if there'll be a wave of penal reform when the released P.O.W. troops return home? You'd think so. Thousands will know what it is like never to be free from constraint and to be compelled to lead an externally ordered life. It should make them understand the criminal code a little better, or rather, make them try to make it understandable. Or will the P.O.W. be so broken himself as not to have the

spirit to battle for those in a like case at home? Or will he be so glad that he is only too thankful to let the remembered things be?

All this, or nearly all, from Don. I'll bet Alec, if he had been here, would have filled in a lot of blank places. Liberty isn't all that's lost in a prison camp. Men without women run very easily to perversion. There were rather horrible examples in Britain. Domineering sods who forced others into it. Sometimes, after really horrifying futile resistance on the part of the victim. But the strange thing is this. Once the act had been completed the resister abandoned all resistance and dropped easily into a quasi-feminine role vis-à-vis his perverter. His masculine characteristics gradually dropped from him and he began to adopt the submissive behavior of a barnyard fowl run down and trodden by a rooster. Usually it was the younger man. Sickening, isn't it?

The inactivity of a prison camp is, I imagine, a forcing ground. Whatever will grow certainly grows in that humid atmosphere. Hence the remarkable feats of escapees. When all else is out of mind, singleness of purpose and resolution are all. But where do they get them from?

66

DON's been gone nearly a week. He's made it.

It seems an eternity of time since I went with him to his home buried in the Welsh Marches. I won't tell you exactly where, but if you've read *A Shropshire Lad* you'll know what it was like. As Housman says . . .

*Clunton and Clunbury, Clungford and Clun,
Are the quietest places under the sun.*

You'll know that the gently rolling hills have, all over them, little lines of hedges straggling into a beguiling semblance of order. Roads wind about absent-mindedly. The churches are enormously bigger than the size of the villages appears to warrant. And thatched roofs startle me. In argument I'm prone to point out that they harbor vermin, are highly inflammable, need constant skilled repair, etc. and etc. Privately, I think them charming. If set among the Bredon Hills. But not, oh not in New Zealand.

We changed trains twice and I made the acquaintance of that legendary thing, the English branch line. I was just getting used to the thin high-pitched apologetic feminine peep of the locomotive whistle of this country when we finally arrived at our station. I was looking out of the window while Don fished things out so I saw her before he did. I knew her at once. His imminent arrival had lit little lamps in her eyes, or perhaps they just reflected an inner radiance.

When she saw him you couldn't say she hurried but, suddenly, they were together and she was holding both his hands between hers and rocking them gently: the reassurance of touch. Then she tucked her arm under his and turned, as a good Englishwoman should, to her husband's guest. But she twitched her shoulder against his arm and she was stroking his thumb gently . . . the one she had under her arm. She smiled in a friendly way and put out a firm hand. England rests, not insecurely, on such as her.

We walked to their old car. Do you remember those old bullet-nosed Morris Cowleys long extinct in New Zealand?

They have immortality in the land of their birth. This one had a name: Emily, because she sniffles. A name and an explanation: how very satisfactory.

I apologized for taking up the time that, doubtless, they'd find little enough of. She laughed and said: "I know you'd like us to neglect you, and besides, I like Him around."

Don, you lucky sweep. Him with a capital letter. And isn't it strange he should have so complete a life beyond the Air Force. I have no existence outside it. Oh yes, he had a complete life all right. You looked at his wife and you knew.

We ate by candlelight, then lit lamps. Does anyone in New Zealand ever speak of paraffin except as a laxative?

I pleaded tiredness and went early to bed. So did they. My candle cast odd shadows on the walls. So it was when I was a child and the shadows which terrified a small boy had to be propitiated. Here, however, they were pleasantly part of my growing drowsiness. There was a sort of speaking stillness about the house—you know—the patter of little noises in an old house. A door creaked, a floorboard replied, a lock clicked, a window squeaked, a mouse or two began foraging, something or other stirred in the thatch. But the noises were friendly. I soon fell asleep.

Next morning the mists were on the hills and there was a sort of cobweb of mist drops everywhere. I went out to feel it in my hair. You could see my path across the grass where my feet had disturbed the droplets.

One precious quiet day followed another. The kind of leave I usually had seemed a rather ignorant wasting of opportunities. And one of the opportunities was to look carefully at Don. I'll bet you all Lombard Street to a china orange that he's made it. Feet firmly planted in his own

fields he let the soil dribble through his fingers, while his wife looked on. Don's life!

They were happy; so quietly, unashamedly happy. Lord how deeply, contentedly happy they were with their few hours snatched from the bloody mess. I don't think they were harassed by tomorrow as I am. Perhaps their lives, so close to the land, gave them balance and they grew close to the soil.

That very soil, by the way, is shamefully encumbered. I didn't realize how badly until Don told me some of the things of which he, although a tenant, is mercifully free. Every evil we have in our New Zealand land tenure, every shocking abuse we have indignantly rejected, flourishes in England. Every disgraceful method of wringing tribute from the real worker is practiced, and sanctified too, by tradition. Of course the Church grabs its share. Why the hell are the English people so apathetic about it? They react fast enough when the foreigner attempts the same thing.

So I looked at Don and thought of all those like him; of his "class" as he would put it. On their own soil they have a fierce independence but their interests cease with the boundary hedges. "Good fences make good neighbors," Don said mildly when I put all this to him. What nice folk! On their own land!

They're incredibly ignorant of the outside world, and quite unbelievably smug about it—in the nicest possible way, of course. "Now, just where is the land you live in?" It must be terrible, for example, for New Zealanders that they have no upper class to open things. As we must get along with politicians doing that very thing, maybe they're right at that!

Watching them, a man and his wife, makes me ache for the future of England. Oh yes, I know, I know. England is urban and industrial and I'm being seduced by the mists and Mrs. Don. Her voice has a lilt in it. Welsh, I suppose. But I prefer to think that it's the "singing heart" of the old Celtic legends. See me? Looking at Don and Mrs. D. and thinking of England.

She was frankly possessive as far as her man was concerned and I'll bet a disloyal thought never entered her head. Queer how that last popped into my head because, in New Zealand, disloyalty in a man is lack of patriotic demonstrativeness; in a woman it's sexual, of course. Somehow, though, things are cleaner in this air and the loyalty of husband and wife takes on its full splendor. And, like a little boy, I look on a little wistfully.

I liked the way Don's wife brought up the children. Oh yes, they had three. Quiet, well-mannered, "seen and not heard" children. Who yet seemed energetic enough. Somehow, though, they lacked the cyclonic energy I had at that age. Or do I just kid myself I had it? Don is quiet too. The countryside that bred them all is quiet, too. There are many worse things than that.

In the quietness the real things grow a little clearer. Birth, breeding, death. That's man's days. And I don't know the whereabouts of any of my children. It's only begun to worry me now.

We left on a typically gray morning. We were up early, packed our few odds and ends, took turns cranking Emily because she snuffles, and then it was time to go. The children said goodbye to their father very sedately. Was he growing to be a stranger? It's very possible in war time.

I sat in the back of the car and watched Don — a man and his wife — their shoulders just touching. Deeply content with their moment while they had it. At the station he hugged her in parting. I had made my departure. Can you tell the quality of their affection from that? They did not kiss as young people do, even though they were young enough. Nor did either speak.

Yet she stood and watched the train until we were round the inevitable branch line bend. I know. I looked back to see.

And I know too, that she'd start the old car competently, call cheerfully to the people she knew, drive quietly homeward. And if she needed it, have a cry before arrival. Then she'd take up again her life of suspended animation. She'd fill her days with duties which, to her, were privileges — the children, the farm — and make plans for next time.

Some day Don is going back to her and the current evil will never take him away again. I couldn't ever let him know how this is. He'd be acutely embarrassed. To him a wife such as his is a very normal thing — everyone is that way — it's her absence he'd notice. And that's the way she'd have it too. Dear quiet folk in your tiny island, the world is crumbling under your feet and you are bewildered by it. Pray God for one little oasis of sanity and simple goodness of heart, and if there's not to be one, pray for my friends, for they will make you one.

It'll be a very quiet little oasis, and maybe even a little dull at times. Don will never build him a house in the clouds. For myself, I'll have one above the bright blue sky. Don will go back to his Shropshire. Thousands of New Zealanders will go back to "The Little Country." Millions of Britons

and Americans too, their Odyssey over. Then will be the time for consolidating their lives and for examining their experiences of life, for drawing a chair to the fire and seeing pictures. Ulysses at Ithaca, the strange seas far away.

Thinking of Don. The splendor has passed me by. Ulysses under his own roof tree, and Penelope waiting: journey's end.

67

DID I ever tell you I was married? That's something not on my file. Work that one out, my friend.

It seems far away and long ago now, and the outlines are a little blurred at this distance. We met at work and we were together for one halcyon year. We lived in each other's pockets and I had almost forgotten a certain blonde in the south, a relic of my university days. We danced together. We went to dances and I doubt if we noticed that there were others present. Know the feeling? We danced as we walked home from dances. We discovered one devious route home after another. We were appropriately surprised when these devious routes did indeed lead us home.

She was as irresponsible as a raindrop on a wire-netting fence. So was I.

We walked on moonlit summer evenings to a high hill across the river. She didn't like walking and was never dressed for it. But the little bridge in the ravine at the foot of the hill was always in darkness no matter how full the moon. I used to sit her on the bridge rail and she pressed

against me with all her strength when I lifted her. On very hot nights she wore nothing under her frock.

There was a peach orchard on the hill slopes. I remember sitting her on a branch there and showering peach blossom on her hair; dark it was but there was never night so dark that you couldn't see the copper highlights in it. She had beautiful hands and there's never been a touch so exciting. She would gently draw two fingers across my lips and it felt like another woman's nakedness, she'd tilt my head back and push her hands inside my shirt and watch me intently, her own mouth slowly opening. Once she took my hand and laid it on her breast over the heart and I could feel it pounding under the smooth coolness of her skin.

Lunacy? Of course! One night she was wearing an accordion-pleated frock, if that means anything to you. They were new at the time and most chic, besides being a devil of a job to keep in pleat. She loved clothes, so she hung it on a peach tree to keep the pleats in.

And me? There were so many things I didn't notice.

Her voice was the lightest and gayest thing in the world. She loved to laugh. She was adept at laughing her way to what she wanted.

It was at this time I appeared on the scene. Let me set it for you. A scene peopled by an old man, white-haired, charming and with a delightful manner and a gentleness that I can't hope to convey to you. He had obviously come from a class above me and I recognized it without any resentment, which surprises me even now. Then there was an angular indomitable, infinitely resourceful iron-gray woman. And a girl.

I married the girl. Not quite as abruptly as that perhaps.

She was engaged to another chap who was very much in love with her but I should have known the lay of the land the night she gave me her engagement ring to put in my pocket while we went swimming. It was as hot as only Northland nights can be and the little pool at the foot of Lovers' Lane lay in wait for us long after the other dancers were home.

"Put this in your pocket for me," said she, "and hurry up and get undressed. Women half clothed look enticing, men half clothed merely look ridiculous." We lay on the grass letting the water drip and she bent over me to say: "You're my kind of animal!" I didn't stop to wonder at that from a girl not yet twenty nor did I think of the ring in my pocket.

We read poetry together. She knew so much more than I. I produced my favorites among Shakespeare sonnets and, when I was leaving the little town, she came to the station and gave me a copy of *Henry Brocken* — ever read it?

I wrote to her. Chiefly in the intervals of quarreling with her successors, but she took the letters at their face value. Presently she followed me. And she brought her proposed bridesmaid with her. Jesus Christ, had I really written all that?

Yet in less than an hour the old magic reasserted itself and we went walking in the moonlight again. After all I'd told her so many outrageous lies that a few more were neither here nor there. Perhaps if I hadn't lied so contemptibly I'd not now bring that ring back to mind.

So we were married. She was older than I. Twenty-one by now, so her father could do nothing but accept the situation. I ought to have known how it would end.

Then her people fell ill and she had to return to look after

them. During the fortnight we were together I did nothing about any permanence. I doubt if I really intended to. No, we didn't get off to a good start. I may as well admit that I slipped a bit here and there while she was away. I was really unfitted for married life.

Then she forced the issue. We went to live together in another town. She used what must have been mighty slim savings to furnish a house, and for a little while all went moderately well. But we both revealed unexpectedly villainous tempers. Everyone sympathized with her and the sympathy-mongering got on my nerves. Things grew worse. In the end I used to beat her. There could only be one end to that.

Then she found herself pregnant and wanted me to do something about it. In spite of my man-of-the-world air I was as innocent as a babe about what one did, and I couldn't even spell the "curette" she demanded. Then things really went to hell.

I'd like to forget what happened before they took her to hospital.

The next day I went to see her. The superintendent had given orders I was not to be admitted but not one of his bunch, including himself, dared lift a finger to stop me. I sat beside her bed and looked at her bruised discolored face. She took my hand and laid it against her cheek. There it rested, among the discolored bruises and the swelling. Holding it gently she went to sleep. I sat there and watched it.

Presently a bloke came to boot me out. As gently as I could, and without disengaging my hand, I reached for his throat and he went away.

She was curetted all right. I was hounded out of town. She went to work in another place. I visited her once.

68

I HOPE you two don't feel I'm just being a difficult bastard. The fact is that I'd got myself into a rut. I was writing to a bloke you'll never know but I was talking to Don. As a result I plugged ahead quite happily once we were in Britain. After all Don and I went on our first mission together and we've been together ever since. You do see, don't you?

Besides it's very important to get everything right and finished. Especially, finished.

Finished is the word. When I think of all the lousy trickery I've been at during my life, I think, too, that the women, for example, needn't harbor too much grievance against me. After all they're going to have a long time to forget me. And I hope they do. But you mustn't forget me. Not you.

And, since my children have never known me we can safely leave them out too. One I know is a boy, but what is the other? If she's a girl I'd like to have seen her. Could have given her some advice too. Not that she'd take it. Not my daughter.

Do you know what advice I'd offer first? ". . . lay off the grog. If a girl knows what she's doing, fair enough; but, daughter of mine, no man fills you up with grog in order to enjoy your sparkling conversation." What am I saying? I don't even know for sure that you were born, little daughter. If you *are* little daughter.

Nobody knows who your mother is. I'm not telling. Not at this late time of day. I haven't mentioned her to Don and I'm not saying anything now. She was one of those not mentioned. Yet I'd know her again if I saw her as surely as I'd know Pip and I can't say anything fairer than that. I think I'd know my little daughter too, if I have a little daughter.

Since I can't tidy up all the loose ends I suppose the best thing is just to leave them loose. Still I do know I have a son. I saw him exactly once. When he was a fortnight old. His mother didn't want to part with him and she hoped in the way that women will, that the sight of the helpless little bastard might soften me. I don't think of that any more than I can help but the lawyer said that the people who adopted him were splendid folk.

69

I WAS wondering when I'd get the chance to talk about Don again. Did you get the one I wrote about Don's home? Somehow I felt more lost than ever when I had left that little haven in the Welsh Marches. It was home for Don. For me it was a reminder that I had no home.

Don's serene full face and his serene broad back mirror the man. He's not as short as Alec. A front gunner doesn't need to be sawn off. But he has to be more versatile. A reserve radio operator as well. The gunnery too is more exacting than it is in the rear turret. There's not the same loneliness nor the same responsibility as is carried way down in the tail, though. The front gunner has a very comforting

sense of not being cut off from the rest. He also has a grand view of what is going on. Or not going on as the case may be.

When the last desperate attack comes, from fighters almost out of fuel and ammo, deliberately, and delaying until the last possible moment, Pip turns towards the attack. As the nose comes round Don sizes up the situation. He and Pip are a wonderful team. Because each thought of the other you'd sometimes think that each thought for the other. They sometimes appeared to share a common mind.

One evening we were near Osnabrück. Anywhere near the Ruhr is frighteningly well defended and the haze from heavy industry isn't a help in finding a target. The heat shimmer in the air, too, is death to accurate bombing. We were interested in the Ruhr side of Osnabrück, a little south and on the way to Duisberg. No need to tell you about Osnabrück. Only Hamm is a bigger railway junction. The broken cloud and the moonlight would, no doubt, have made the pattern of the lines a thing of singular geometric beauty. Like Hamm. But what goats we'd be to go that way.

All the same, someone dropped to us. Do you think Fritz had radio location as early in the war as that? The lights swung up. You almost seem to see the shafts climbing towards you, but these were over the marshalling yards and we felt very safe. Away to the south.

Then I saw tracer whipping past and heard Alec yell. It was a fair catch. The dim black shapes appeared to starboard. Night fighters are curiously like bats. Although they fly so fast they don't appear to. Relative to us, their approach appears slow. And surprisingly graceful. Then the leisurely approach suddenly and sickeningly accelerates. They close ter-

rifingly fast. The whump whump of hits on the old girl seem to be blows on one's own body. The smell of cordite is astringent.

But as we turn and Don opens up, at least we're fighting back. We're fighting from a better gun platform too, but we're slower, less maneuverable and we're outnumbered.

Don phlegmatically leads the target. The tracer patterns, pro and con, curve into beauty. Our lives are in Don's firm and steadfast hands, his unfrightened mind and his lovely coordination. Not as swift as Alec's, perhaps but sweet to watch nevertheless. If you can see anything at all.

Everything that happens with fighters is sudden. The bats close slowly. Then, suddenly, freakishly, they're only a couple of hundred yards away. But Pip's not caught napping. Nor is Don. We turn towards them. That's what makes the approach seem so rapid. We're closing at over 600 m.p.h. Half a mile a second. From extreme range to close action in that time. Then our avoiding action clears him and he passes underneath to turn for the next pass at us. This is Alec's pigeon until Pip can set him up for Don again.

There's a small fire halfway down to the tail. I beat it out with my gloves. There's a stink of petrol too. Could mean anything. The tanks are self-sealing and only a little escapes but that little certainly doesn't escape our attention. Hope that's what it is.

Is this the time? The time that comes to every pitcher? But Don gets him. A fierce feeling wells up in all of us. It was one of us for it. We win.

The white plume from his engine is clear in the light of the flares: shadowy in the starlight. It turns black.

A shot-down fighter is, according to the Americans, merely

an incident in their bombing sorties. The route to the Ruhr is paved with the carcasses of Me.s shot down by these indomitable heroes. As they fly, they say, at around thirty thousand feet the fighter opposition must frequently take them for meteorites. All the same they really are astonishingly well defended, I'm told. Places for eight gunners, two pilots, an engineer, two radio men and half a dozen cameramen. The residue of the weight-carrying capacity is divided between bombs and Coca-Cola. They have a bombsight which can "put a bomb into a pickle barrel from six miles up." The trouble is that Fritz has called in all the pickle barrels and so there isn't a target offering. Not that that matters. When a Flying Fortress releases its bombs, gravity ensures that they strike something terrestrial.

Don't listen to me. Today's a bad day. Major dressings. The Americans will be all right. Everyone is the same for the first few months. *We* were the same stupid know-alls too. The trouble is their publicity boys won't let the learners keep their mouths shut and learn in peace. Sometimes I wonder if they really have as many "accredited publicity representatives" as they appear to have. It seems they have an extraordinary number of nonfighting troops servicing those who do the work.

They set great store by what they call "morale building," which is somehow connected with hot showers, strings of medals, gum and "seconds of Jello." I have a feeling that it is also obliquely connected with mom-raised males suddenly forced to be men. The necessity for morale building, I mean.

Once the U.S. men shed Mom from their shoulders and stop crying on ours they'll be world-beaters. Their Marines

are already a *corps d'élite*, very nearly as good as they so loudly trumpet they are. The best units are tough, resourceful, adaptable and courageous in the best sense of that battered word. In time most of them will be like that. Seasoned.

You're going to live through a hard decade though, while you work out how Hollywood won the Battle of Britain and the Battle of Stalingrad.

The fighter Don shot down trailed his plume of white. It turned black and the nose dropped. The characteristic glow appeared and he slipped out of vision. If the pilot doesn't get out before the red glow the pilot doesn't get out.

70

FIGHTING men don't hate each other. Sometimes, not always, they hate war. It's the sheer senselessness of it all that irks us. We must raise up some alternative to all that folly. And judging by the Fritz the footsloggers know it shouldn't be hard. Said Fritz is the finest infantryman in the world — tough, determined, uncomplaining, disciplined and resourceful. And he's a damned fine aviator too. To hell with all these atrocity stories. It's not men — but war — which does such things. I don't hate my enemy — but I'd kill him like a shot nevertheless — as he would me. It's our business. Air warfare is given a knightly air by the gutter press. You know the sort of thing. "Duel in the clouds," etc., and it always ends with someone, uninjured, floating earthward in windless clear air to land safely alongside a pub. Actually, we're the

most cowardly lice that crawl. When I release a ton of high explosive and bolt from the scene of my crime, what redress have the mangled children below? If I bale out why should not the outraged people below pour oil over me and fire it? Why, in heaven's name, not? Why not in the name of hell?

Yet all men are brothers, "there is neither Jew nor Greek nor bond nor free. Ye are all one in Jesus Christ." I'd like to meet Him. His words, garbled, distorted, willfully sometimes, and wrenched from their context, still seem to offer hope to a way out of this mess. He was so damned *civilized*. Have we not all one Father? If there is any truth in Christianity, how can any Christian fight? There simply can't be a "just war" if all men are brothers. Agnostics like me will continue to fight and so be eliminated. Perhaps it's as well. Perhaps it is His plan to eliminate those incapable of spiritual growth. As for myself, I'm of the earth, earthy. At least I shall never grow so old that all the sharpness is gone from my sensations. Perhaps it's as well I'll never see New Zealand again. All the places I love are haunted—haunted by women, and chances not taken. Because that is the same for everyone, it makes it no easier for me. Still, there was an acuteness and an awareness of living about me in those days. Perhaps I did have the capacity for spiritual growth before it was overlaid by the coarse earth of the life we live.

71

THE pitcher and the well.

I suppose Air Ministry brainstormers are responsible for the climate of opinion right through the show. Or do more lowly

creatures have them too? At a lower level of intensity of course.

I suppose we must have begun to accumulate a reputation (said he, modestly), because all sorts of odd assignments come our way. For example, that little jaunt to the Baltic for no purpose in particular. That was only a couple of days ago. Perhaps I ought to explain that I take no count of time since I am here, so "yesterday" means the day before they brought me here.

As usual there was a very special briefing and a little, well — not quite unpleasantness among the others. It appears there is an island in the Baltic and it interests us profoundly. By now, both Geoff and I are adept at asking the question better left unasked, and a confused, and hence angry big shot, gave us a choice of two improbable, and mutually exclusive, explanations as to why an obscure Baltic island should be of interest.

Thinking it over now, I recall we were often sent on missions where photography of a special kind was called for. Boy, am I flattering myself! This time, much more than photography was required and when we were asked to note "the enemy reaction to our presence if it were detected" I confess my scalp prickled at the sinister sound of it.

So off to the Baltic. Everything of the very best. But wait, my bold airmen, it appears that, at the very moment of departure, there's more to tell. How's that for security? The island is apparently still important, but only as indicating the real focus of attention. I now incline to the second of the explanations offered us. Perhaps Fritz really *is* jacking up something that will make our radio-location useless. And after all our research on it too! Let's go look-see, as the Yanks say.

I did tell you we had been converted to four engines sometime back, didn't I? I get so confused, lying here.

All we have to go on is the report of a lone, returning aircraft round about last April. But I'll bet intelligence has a lot more from our spies.

The run to the Baltic isn't the hair-raising job it was in the early days. Everything is improved. We have a mile of runway to play with, four engines, scientific aids of all kinds. So why should I be so full of foreboding? With no bomb load and ample fuel we gradually make altitude over the North Sea. The night is ideal for our purpose. A big moon and drifting cloud. With our fuel reserves we can pick our time and use the cloud and the moon as necessary. Besides, nobody is going to be interested in a lone aircraft which clearly can't do much harm to anyone and is probably lost anyway. We have some of those new metallized strips to set up fake images on the enemy screens but I don't think we'll need them. Not tonight. This is a piece of cake.

Sedately we climb to operational height. The nav. is childish. We cross the neck of Denmark where virtuous Danes are minding their own business, in bed. The Baltic unfolds its familiar grayness. We've been here before.

Now to find the area defined with such precision. This should be it. Every point of identification tallies. We're within ten miles of the pinpoint.

And then a bloody mist blew over. From nowhere at all. Just a frustrating blanket that meant failure. I had a quick word with Geoff. There was no sign of mist a moment ago. It blew up like magic, just as though Fritz had ordered it. Perhaps *that's* what the trick is! Has Fritz a means of condensing mist to order? We can test that by stooging about

for a while and watching it disperse in the light breeze forecast for ground level.

And it doesn't disperse!

Why doesn't it disperse? Is it being renewed all the time? Wait a minute! Who said it was mist? It's *smoke*. Visions of Brest leaped to my mind. Remember? How Fritz protects his submarine pens. Is this a submarine training base? Or an experimental base for a new type of submarine? Still the smoke hung over the area. No photos tonight, unless . . . what about it Geoff? Seems safe enough.

So we edge cautiously downward to try to get under the smoke. A lovely night. The quiet countryside, the reflection of the moon on the sea: delightful. But, of course, the light isn't good enough for photography. Not that we're worried about that. At the right time I released my flare, and then all hell broke loose, just as if it had been waiting for us. Lights by the score; accurate, carefully coordinated fire. Holy hell: how come all of this on the Baltic dunes?

Geoff smashes all over the sky to confuse the predictors. But the lights get us. Everything in the aircraft looks damnable in that unnatural clarity. Minutes now, boys, but no: Geoff slipped the lights and I knew he'd try his favorite survival trick, down on the rooftops. So here we are on the roofs. And I'm as scared as hell. No hope of a broolly opening at this height, and, great greasy lumps appear all around us even at this level. How is Fritz depressing his guns. Hit all over the place; the old girl's coming apart at the seams; how long can she be controlled? Then, miraculously, we're clear. No one even injured. But the aircraft is just a flying junk heap. Still she *is* flying. Now to set a course for home but, what was that? Tracer? Christ! Tracer, and us crippled.

Did you know there are straggling pine forests along here? Planted to control the dunes, no doubt. Well, Geoff plays hide and seek in the foliage. At near stalling speed.

But the sky is lousy with fighters. Why all the defense? We are taking a terrible beating but lateral control hasn't gone yet. Won't they ever run out of fuel and ammo? Don reports in his dry way that the attackers are different. Dear Lord, is the place ringed with fighter stations? Geoff makes no attempt to get away either. He sticks to his narrow belt of trees. The fighters hope he'll make a break for home, and he won't get there. So Geoff stays put. We have plenty of fuel.

But our luck can't last forever. The odds are too heavy. Then Geoff found a firebreak and practically sat on the ground in it. It was a tight fit for the old girl but it baffled the single-seater boys for a while — say two minutes — but that gave us an edge.

Clear for the moment I can see Fritz has some special reason for making sure we don't get home. So I set a course via Sweden!

We have plenty of fuel still and the opposition will certainly alert all the fighter stations from here to the North Sea. I don't kid myself that we're not tracked. I'm simply making it as tough as possible for them and the unexpected does sometimes catch Fritz a little short. So let's have a look at Sweden. What's the use of all this neutrality unless *we* use it?

Now, why didn't I notice that one fan was feathered? Three engines eh? This is fun. Geoff says that the old girl is barely manageable and it will not be possible to keep her under control indefinitely. Bless you, Geoff. What are the Swedish internment camps like?

The coast of Sweden is unmistakable. But we need a lot of altitude to cross over to Norway and Geoff says that we can't climb. So we follow the coast after we've cut across the flat part of Sweden. The Swedes mind their own business in an exemplary manner. But Oslo Fiord is different. All we want to do is to sneak across it. No luck.

Two fighters. One on the tail and the other broadside. Wise guys. Geoff sits on the sea and we pray for a patch of fog. All this time, every bit of two minutes, the fighters position themselves in a leisurely way. We're not going far. They have all the time in the world and a lame duck on their hands. Which is going to make the dummy pass and which the real one? In some occult way Pip could divine such things. But Geoff doesn't work like that so I was mighty surprised when he turned towards the fellow on the beam. As soon as he bore, Don fired a burst for range, and (don't believe me if you don't want to), scored a near miracle. The bloke lost control for a moment and swung sharply left-handed with the torque. He almost rammed his cobber who went into a near vertical climb. He fell off the top of it of course and before he could recover a wingtip touched the sea. He swung in a queer tight semicircle before shattering on the water. Christ, did that look like salvation!

But the other guy has got a grip on his aircraft by this time yet he doesn't make a pass at us, even though he can see we can barely fly. We're only feet above the sea, partly from choice, and partly from necessity. "Calling up reinforcements," said Geoff.

So we just poke her nose in the direction of England and wait for them to come . . .

Our shadower is carefully plotting our course and speed

and relaying it, of course. Where shall we be picked up?

Presently he heads off for base and we can expect his boy friends any time now. I get one of the best quality Air Ministry brainstorms.

"Get in behind him, Geoff, and try to follow him to base. Where would be the last place to look for a lame duck? Over your home base."

"Radio location," says Geoff.

"Metalized strips," say I.

We try it. It works.

I think they employ Geoff and me on these shows so much because we both think Fritz's way. I'll bet the blokes, failing to intercept us, just didn't believe the confusing data that ground control, all foxed by the metalized strips, tried to ram down their throats.

But we are still hundreds of miles from home. The fighters didn't fire a shot so we're no worse than before except that the old girl is vibrating herself to pieces. We'd dumped everything unessential earlier but we find a few other bits and pieces to jettison. It gives us something to do.

Why is radio so vulnerable? Still the lack of radio won't matter so much. On a night like this your uncle could get you home standing on his head. I only hope he doesn't end up that way.

And now to sit it out, as Alec used to say. When the tension is on, I often think of him. He was a sweet gunner.

Every aching minute brings England closer. But everything is operating on a strictly temporary basis. We're torn apart almost any place you care to mention.

We sit down at the first place we see. Dear Lord, what a landing, Geoff. We run clean to the boundary and pile the old girl up there. A hell of a crash but no fire. Let's count noses.

And after all that derring-do, nobody has a scratch. For the love of God, would you believe it? All right! Neither did I, but it was true, nevertheless.

Food. Beautiful food. And me alive to eat it. Hot, hot coffee with oodles of sugar. Geoff, did *you* have a bite on the return?

And, before we finish eating, here's little Lord Fauntleroy. Who'd believe he could get here so fast. The interrogation which followed was the most searching I've known. And, all the time, more and more blokes dropped in until the place was stiff with scrambled egg. They always try to make Geoff and me disagree on something or other. In an argument we remember things we might otherwise have overlooked. Our every word was taken down verbatim and used for a further re-examination when we had finished. Jesus, this must be important!

But all I wanted was sleep. Perhaps our replies were getting confused because the most senior bloke said, as gently as a father, that we should get some sleep at once. We did.

And when we woke they were still waiting for us!

"What would you say was the enemy reaction? Did the strength of the defense surprise you? Why were you not intercepted on the outward journey?" I had the answer to that one. Fritz hoped to get away with concealment. And he was sure enough on the defense to be sure that no one would get away to tell.

With intervals for reflection, we were grilled most of the day. Then, with a nonchalance which deceived nobody we were told that we were to go back in daylight. "In daylight," I yelled. Geoff whistled softly.

God have mercy on us all. I was in daylight affairs at Brest. I can't think. In daylight. In daylight.

What a briefing! Ages of it. Hopefully I suggested that, if a number were sent, some would be sure to survive. But no. We need information about so very small an area that . . . oh, well. Get some sleep, boys. Sleep!

And so the pitcher goes again to the well.

That was yesterday by my reckoning: that is, the day before I came here. Which makes me think I'm somewhere near the Baltic.

Don never mentioned Geoff and you two blokes have never heard of him.

continued from front flap

We do not know the name of the man who is speaking to us. But we *know* him — his courage, pride, cruelty, joy, and, above all, honesty. The book speaks for itself.

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